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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE SINGER ACTS

BY

© NANCY ROBICHAUD

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.

DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA

Edmonton, Alberta
FALL 1994

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7 July 1994

ABSTRACT

The thesis **The Singer Acts** examines methodologies for training the singer to act in opera to determine whether or not there is a prescriptive acting theory for opera similar to the theoretical canon and methodology for carrying it out that exists for theatre. The thesis investigates a cross-section of theory and methodology that addresses various forms of opera: from the more realistically based to the highly formalized.

To cover the range of options available to the singer-actor, the paper studies four approaches. H. Wesley Balk's texts *The Complete Singer-Actor*, *Performing Power*, and *The Radiant Performer* address the singer-actor's need to overcome emotional and technical blocks and to gain greater autonomy in the learning process. Leon Major's conservatory style program within the University of Maryland takes a process-oriented approach in training the singer-actor to become a contributing member of the creative ensemble. Robert DeSimone at the University of Texas at Austin offers performance experiences wherein singers acquire acting skills primarily through the rehearsal process. Marshall Pynkoski trains members of Opera Atelier in the practice of rhetorical gesture for acting in the seventeenth- and eighteenth- century operas which his company stages.

After identifying the discipline from which the teacher/director moved into opera, each chapter studies the aims of the system, what it expects of the singer-actor in relation to the text and score, and the interaction of the singer-actor with the teacher/director, other performers, and the audience. Each chapter also critically examines the interplay of intellect, emotion, imagination, spontaneity and physicality in the singer-actor's creation and playing of a role. The analysis of each approach determines whether or not it offers an integrated system for training the singer to act in opera. The analysis also examines to what extent the approach corresponds to systems that exist for training the actor in theatre. The conclusion summarizes similarities and differences in the approaches Balk, Major, DeSimone, and Pynkoski use in training the singer to act.

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INTRODUCTION

In his keynote address at Opera America's 1993 annual convention (published in *Opera America Newsline* July/Aug. 1993), internationally-known director, Colin Graham drew attention to changing trends in operatic production:

> During the last 50 years, in most of Europe, opera has looked to the theater as its touchstone, rather than to the opera house. (14)

While Graham acknowledged the persistence of major opera houses in featuring international stars that die-hard, aging audiences will pay exorbitant prices to hear, he believes that the future of opera is with smaller, national companies. He calls for a new Golden Age of opera, "built on ensemble rather than ego, and where discovery rather than imitation will lead to a new and vital excitement" (20).

But before opera can function as lyric theatre, its performers must be actors as well as singers. Graham is not satisfied that universities, which he sees as the main training grounds in America, are providing the students with the skills needed for opera:

> ...an overwhelming majority of young singers is emerging from the realms of academia almost totally unequipped for the job at hand -- beyond considerations of voice. (17)

Graham's call for theatre training for the opera student equivalent to that which an acting student receives echoes Anthony Addison's observations in his

1992 article, "The Teaching of Opera in our Universities":

> A young person learns to sing and it is assumed that, at the moment when his vocal technique becomes secure, he will automatically develop a stage technique; that his ability to sing a role carries with it the ability to interpret it dramatically; that physical dexterity comes with vocal dexterity and that full understanding of dramatic ensemble can be acquired in the practice room. (35)

Addison argued that singers should receive theatre training before they are plunged into production.

Andrew Foldi, Director of the Chicago Lyric Opera Center, addressed the National Opera Association in 1991 on the same issue, education of the opera singer:

> They must be able to take acting in the drama department, *for credit*. (In some schools this is taken for granted, in others they won't hear of it.) And then this acting training has to be transferred to the operatic medium, which is a different "bag" altogether -- and this is one point that has to be hammered home at the theatre department on the other hand. (17)

Foldi outlined precisely what makes acting in opera difficult. He begins with the dictates of the score on timing:

> The singing actor has to be able to make the action totally natural and spontaneous, while making sure that action takes place on the second eighth note of the second beat, for example. How does a singing actor deal with text repetition. It is very difficult to repeat a phrase umpteen times and find legitimate subtext to make this work dramatically. And contrary to some theories, it is a fact of life in a big house that one has to be able to see the conductor at crucial points. It is not that you are glued to the conductor singing your declaration of love to the person in the pit who waves

> a baton at you, but if you have an entrance together with the orchestra after a fermata you had better be in a place where you can see the conductor....Then consider, as an actor, the problem of how much longer it takes to sing something than to say it....Then let us add to the other allied disciplines: mime, stage combat, and ballet. Yes ballet.
>
> Considering the vast amount of seventeenth and eighteenth century repertoire we do (and I am not talking about the *Marriage of Figaro* taking place at the Trump Tower but about it taking place in the 18th century at the castle of Aguas Frescas), the singing actor must be able to move with grace and style. Here no amount of Stanislavsky and method acting will see you through. (17)

The articles cited are representative of much recent literature calling for better theatre training for the singer-actor and decrying the present state of opera. The complaints are noted. What has been done to rectify the situation?

Research into texts on acting in opera reveals that twentieth-century books devoted to this topic reflect the evolution of the singer to the current status of member of a creative team.

George Shea's *Acting in Opera*, first published in 1915 (and re-issued in 1980), relies heavily on melodramatic, rhetorical gesture to enhance the singer's stage presence. Its introduction summarizes the "principles" and "practice of acting" as follows: "the combination of glance, attitude, gesture, walk and bearing, which forces an easy and effective 'stage presence'" (vii). While the book advises that these plastic arts must coincide with the sentiment of the moment, the only references to inner technique are instructions to enter the "skin of the personage" in order to find the right emotion (82). The text does not explore how the singer achieves entry into the character. Shea alludes to the movement towards realism in the theatre of his day with his comments on "Partisans of 'reform in acting'" and the "fourth wall," but cautions the singer, "nevertheless, the audience does exist, and lyric actors especially, must *sing toward it*" (83). Shea's instructions on economy of movement suggest a rather static production:

> Take up a position and exploit it. Upon one attitude of body and feet, you may perfectly well hang three to six different gestures accompanied by variations in the pose of the head and the direction of the eyes. And each of these sub-attitudes may be maintained for one or several measures of the music, so that a comparatively few attitudes and gestures will suffice for the "decoration" of an entire air.... (13)

In the 1930s Boris Goldovsky began his work as an opera director. He reacted against the standard positions and static nature of opera. His 1968 text, *Bringing Opera to Life*, explains his methods of evoking life-like performances from opera singers. Judging from the measure-by-measure blocking instructions recorded, his productions were not lacking in stage movement. Movement is motivated internally by the character's urge to move on changes of thought and emotion, (reasons and urges, 126), and externally by strategic placement of props and set pieces. To keep the singer involved in the scene during musical interludes and alert for opera's technical difficulties, which he terms "razor blade moments" (20), he develops a silent script for the singer. Thus Santuzza does not have to count her twenty-eight measure orchestral interlude in *Cavalleria rusticana*. She can synchronize her silent script with the cello line (138).

Actions in his opera are motivated. But these motivations are not determined by the singer-actor, nor is the silent script devised by the performer. These are given to the singers to digest just as they must make the composer's score their own. The director does the analytical work: "Before turning to the actual staging of a scene, I find it quite essential to give the participants a clear idea of its overall construction" (27). Later in the text, he states very clearly the singer's role:

> I would like to state emphatically that it is not the business of the singer to invent dramatic ideas any more than it is his business to compose music. But just as the singer interprets the score and gives it the stamp of his personality, so must he absorb, digest, and interpret the staging ideas of his dramatic guide. The mis-en-scène is created by the director, but the reasons and urges that govern the behavior of the characters must be re-created by the singing actor and must become the spontaneous and vivid expressions of his own mind and heart. The composer notates his intentions in the score; the stage director explains, analyzes, and demonstrates; but it is the singer who brings their ideas to life, and he must work at them until he has made these ideas completely his own. (113-114)

Goldovsky's 1973 book, *Bringing Soprano Arias to Life*, prescribes what the singer should do during each measure of the aria. The work explains the character's motivation and proceeds to give stage directions. For example, in the third measure of the *allegro* section of "Dove sono," Mozart's Countess enacts the following:

> With the "nel languire" she turns her head Clw [clockwise] and sings the sad C minor phrase over her R shoulder." (124)

The movement is more naturalistic than Shea's instructions to Delila to begin "Amour, viens aider ma faiblesse," at left centre "vibrant with perfidious purpose" (69). Shea's singer-actor, however, has more scope in selecting appropriate gestures. Goldovsky's books encourage director dependency and speak more to a director than a singer-actor.

In 1975 two books on European opera production were published in English in America, *Stanislavski on Opera* and *The Music Theatre of Walter Felsenstein*. The former looks at Stanislavski's work in his Moscow opera studio in the 1920s. Since much has been written on Stanislavski's system, it is important to point out that Stanislavski applies his system as it appears in *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character* to opera. (His method of physical actions was to come later in his career.) Stanislavski drew his inspiration for training the singer to act from the work of Russian basso Chaliapin, who took opera from the prescribed gestures and costumes into the psychological and physical centres of the individual characters he portrayed. What is important for contemporary opera students to note about the atmosphere of Stanislavski's opera studio is that Stanislavski applied an ensemble approach to the rehearsal and performance work there:

> Stanislavski's genius lay in his capacity to make everyone engaged in a production active co-creators with him in his directorial concept. All dividing lines were wiped out between what he himself suggested or demonstrated and what the actors did on their own creative initiative or because of the logical necessities inherent in their parts. This is the overriding significance of Stanislavski's method of work in bringing forth an expression of collective art -- which is the aim of theatre. (*Stanislavski on Opera* 374)

Walter Felsenstein, Intendant of the Komische Oper in East Berlin from

1947 to 1975, believed in an actor's theatre too. He trained an ensemble of singers to generate the drama of the role themselves:

> The singer must not do anything at the command of somebody else, whether it is the composer, the librettist, the conductor, or the stage director. He must produce everything, including his own singing, by himself, as a necessary expression of his inner state, as a necessary projection of his striving, and as a necessary reaction to the actions of his partners. One must not gain the impression for one single moment that he could have expressed himself differently, with other words or other sounds. This presupposes that singer, conductor, and stage director are completely in accord with one another. During the performance the singer should not be the executant but, as it were, the creator.... (150)

The book does not present an acting methodology but gives insights into the methods used by an important director and trainer of singing actors.

In this decade, *Complete Preparation* (1992) by Joan Dornemann with Maria Ciaccia and *The Third Line* (1993) by Daniel Helfgot and William Beeman explain to prospective opera performers the type of training and preparation they need to succeed in today's lyric theatre. The first section of *The Third Line* acknowledges deficiencies in existing training centres in preparing singers with the theatre skills they need and encourages singers themselves to "develop a strategy for accomplishing this massively complicated training" (5). The major portion of the text helps the singer prepare for the first rehearsal by analyzing the union between the text and the music that sets it. Although the book does not prescribe an acting theory, the approach differs from Goldovsky's in that it invites the performers to be creative partners by asking questions and determining answers for themselves so that they can contribute to the rehearsal process:

> Good directors are rarely disturbed at working with people who come to a production with ideas about how a role is to be played. If performers have taken the time and effort to work out an intelligent, clear approach to the role, differences in taste and opinion between them and the director are rarely insurmountable. (140-141)

Another area of concern that recent publications on training the musical performer address is that of stage fright and the performer's state of mind. The singing of opera, as well as being a theatrical event, is an athletic one. Texts such as Robert Caldwell's *The Performer Prepares* (1990) recognize that "many of the techniques for attaining optimum performance in athletics adapt quite well to musical performance" (3). This book gives a systematic method of working on the self during practice sessions to allow the total performer to release the charismatic performances that music audiences relish.

It should be pointed out that none of the books constitute a well-developed prescriptive acting theory that presents the singer with a coherent methodology. Further, the books themselves are not a substitute for the practical training ground and do not form the theoretical position for any program that trains singer-actors. While elements of the Stanislavski System are employed as the basis of many programs across North America, there is great suspicion in the opera community that the American "Method," with its emphasis on Stanislavski's emotion memory, does not constitute, in itself, a process for training the singer to act.

The purpose of this thesis is to determine whether or not prescriptive acting theories are available to prospective opera singers to enable them to develop skills necessary for opera and whether or not these theories are as viable as those available to actors training for a career in the theatre. A prescriptive acting theory offers a statement of theoretical position and a methodology for carrying it out. The thesis also investigates a cross-section of theory and methodology that addresses various forms of opera: from the more realistically based to the highly formalized.

To cover a range of options available to the singer-actor, the paper studies H. Wesley Balk's texts, *The Complete Singer-Actor*, *Performing Power*, and *The Radiant Performer*, and looks at what is being done in two American universities: Leon Major's opera studio at the University of Maryland and Robert DeSimone's program at the University of Texas at Austin. To respond to Foldi's pleas for singers to take ballet classes as an approach to period production, the thesis looks at Toronto's Opera Atelier.

After identifying the discipline from which the program's teacher/director moved into opera, each chapter studies the aims of the system, what it expects of the singer-actor in relation to the text and score, and the interaction of the singer-actor with the teacher/director, other performers and the audience. Each chapter also critically examines the interplay of intellect, emotion, imagination, spontaneity and physicality in the singer-actor's creation and playing of a role. The conclusion summarizes recent work being done to train the singer to act.

A contemporary American system that attempts to address all the singer-actor's needs is that of H. Wesley Balk. He knows that the singer today must learn to act. The singer also has to gain greater autonomy in the learning process. His student has to overcome emotional and technical blocks to project a charismatic or radiant performance. Balk's system provides the methodology for the Wesley Balk Institute in Minneapolis and for many workshops he has conducted throughout the country. This thesis will, then, examine his system to determine how complete it is in preparing the singer-actor for opera.

The decision to observe programs in Maryland and Texas is based on several factors. They represent two approaches; one offers a studio style structure and the other a more typical university approach. The University of Maryland is gaining a significant reputation for its dedication to training the singer to act in its two-and-a-half-year process-oriented program. Leon Major, who directs the program, is an acting teacher and theatre director with considerable experience in opera. He also has a book currently in draft form based on his experience teaching the singer to act. The University of Texas at Austin offers a more typical university program where opera majors have an opera workshop and opportunities to train through performances in department productions. Robert DeSimone, who heads the program is a musician and opera director with extensive theatre training. He also supervises a graduate program in opera directing.

The inclusion of Opera Atelier in this thesis allows for a study of a company directed by classical danceer Marshall Pynkoski, who draws on rhetorical gesture to stage operas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This company addresses a whole segment of opera for which psychologically based acting theories do not seem suited.

Thus, this thesis looks at acting for the opera performer as taught by two theatre practitioners, a musician, and a dancer to see how their various backgrounds inform their approaches to acting for the singer and whether or not their approaches constitute a viable prescriptive acting theory for opera.

CHAPTER 1

THE QUEST FOR RADIANCE

H. WESLEY BALK'S *THE COMPLETE SINGER-ACTOR*, *PERFORMING POWER* AND *THE RADIANT PERFORMER*

A search for a current North American text that offers a prescriptive acting theory for the opera singer cannot overlook H. Wesley Balk's three books on the subject: *The Complete Singer-Actor* (1977), *Performing Power* (1985) and *The Radiant Performer* (1991), hereafter referred to respectively as *CSA*, *PP*, and *RP*. Balk drew his incentive for his first book from summer opera workshops which he led in Aspen and at Wolf Trap. His other texts grew from workshops with singers in summer sessions in Minnesota and workshops in major opera training centres throughout the United States such as San Francisco Opera's Merola Program.

Balk has combined work in opera and theatre since his own college days. During his professional theatre training at the Yale Drama School he trained in opera directing at the Yale Music School. His professional career in teaching and theatre directing led him to the Drama Department of the University of Minnesota, where he remains on staff. He served as artistic director for the Minnesota Opera Company from 1965-1984 (*CSA* vii-ix). He left that position to become their director of artistic development. He has also directed operas for other companies including New York City Opera, Sante Fe Opera, San Francisco Opera, Houston Opera, Washington Opera and Central City Opera (*RP*, back cover). His early experience training opera singers in acting came with the Minnesota Opera Studio.

Because he has worked with young opera singers, Balk understands the conflict between the discipline of the singer's training and the actor's need for imaginative play. In *The Complete Singer-Actor* he adapts acting exercises to include musical components. As an educator he is interested in recent teaching theories concerning the variety of learning styles present in any classroom: he is aware of the visual learner, the hearing-dominant learner, and the kinesthetic learner. His knowledge of the perceptual modes informs the approach he takes to strengthen the projective or performative modes of the singer-actor. Strengthening the projective modes, of which the voice is only one, is the main thrust of *Performing Power*. His interest in psychology and psychotherapy as they apply to personal enrichment led him to a holistic approach for the performer in the third book, *The Radiant Performer*, where he proposes a spiral learning system that will put performers in personal charge of their own progress. Balk's spiral technique is a four-step learning process that allows students to move from the known into the unknown by doing the new, becoming aware of tensions the new creates and eliminating tensions that interfere with energy release. At each stage as students move along the spiral, they praise themselves for releasing energy. Thus students experience success integrating new material and solving problems it creates before these problems become energy-draining habits.

The singer who wants to explore Balk's system should be aware that his approach for training the singer to act evolved between 1977 and 1991. In drawing an energized performance from the singer, he shifted his focus from the inner responses evoked through exercises in the manner of Stanislavski's emotion memory and "magic if" to an outside-in approach. The singer's physical being triggers intuitive discovery in this latter approach. Finally Balk moved to a method of working that integrates the inner and outer. The prospective student is advised that it is necessary to read all three books to grasp his teachings. This chapter will examine Balk's system to determine the function the singer-actor plays in opera for Balk and to learn how his system prepares the singer to fulfil that function.

AIMS OF THE SYSTEM

In the preface to *The Complete Singer-Actor*, the first of the three books, Balk highlights *emotion*, which is for him the essential quality of opera:

> It [opera] is the essence of high emotional situations: people are forever dying, loving, hating, agonizing, rhapsodizing, and generally tearing a passion to tatters. This emotional intensity is opera's greatest strength and, as we are reminded in thousands of cartoons, its greatest weakness. For intense emotional

> situations enacted without total commitment can appear ludicrous, boring, and all the other pejoratives with which unfulfilled opera is favored by the world at large. But the emotional potential is there and offers the precise objective challenge needed to bypass the obstacle of self-consciousness. The challenge demands flexibility of response and freedom from tension of all kinds as well as a sustaining strength of emotional commitment. (vii)

To prepare the performer to meet the operatic challenge, Balk records a system committed to providing the singer with an integrated performance program as an alternative to what he terms "supermarket training" (*CSA* 17). Balk reminds the reader that singers must collect their skills from many sources and meet the demands of their various teachers: the voice teacher, in addition to the perfect tone, wants "electric elbows" not limp arms hanging down at the side; the music coach wants "excitement in the sound"; the German diction coach wants the mouth shaped for the umlaut, a shaping that conflicts with the voice teacher's instructions for the best tone; the movement teacher calls, "Tuck in your buns!" and the acting teacher asks for the reliving of intense personal experiences. The singer must integrate all these skills and memorize the role before attending the first rehearsal with the director, who frequently calls for more involvement while the conductor warns, "Watch me for the cue" (*RP* 40).

In addition to providing an integrated approach, Balk aims at freeing the singer-actor from authority dependency by giving the performer the tools with which to work independently. One of the prerequisites he establishes for success is the ability of the teacher and student to create a nonjudgmental atmosphere from which the student ventures into the unknown through free play. He explains that opera training can run in two directions:

> ...it can be either the most rigidifying, authoritarian, tension-creating, puppet-making indoctrination, or the most freeing, joyous, open, thrilling kind of personal growth activity. (*CSA* vii)

The former is what he fears many singers experience; the latter is the aim of his system.

Central to his system is the singer who is free. This freedom includes a body that allows the voice to soar and an approach to interpretation that leads to freedom of choice. As he says in *The Radiant Performer*, "We have singled out the capacity for choice as primary in expanding one's performing power" (340). This freedom keeps the performer from spinning wheels in the rut of the one "correct" way of practising or the one "correct" interpretation that may not correspond with the interpretations of the director, conductor and other singers in the cast. Singers must learn to take responsibility for their own progress rather than remaining authority dependent. Singers are then free to release the emotion that the art demands.

FUNCTION OF THE SINGER AS ACTOR

Balk defines acting as "showing how a character feels" (*RP* 248). In *The Complete Singer-Actor* Balk states that the singer-actor who embodies the emotion is "the true life of the piece" (9). By projecting a character's feelings, the singer-actor fulfils a prime goal of "sharing the music-theater experience as intensely as possible" with the audience (*CSA* 73).

For Balk the singer-actor does not have to "become" the character in order to convey emotion intensely. The necessary intensity, according to Balk, can come from the singer's focus. He relates an anecdote about congratulating a tenor on his absorption in his role. When Balk asked the singer for a description of his process, the answer surprised him:

> He was thinking so hard about what he had to accomplish musically that none of the thoughts I had assumed were in his mind were actually there....The singer focused on something vital to him. (*CSA* 71)

The intensity, Balk observed, came from the singer's commitment to the task at hand not necessarily from his identification with the character.

More important than an actor-character merger for Balk is the actor's ability to fulfil the lyric theatre's purpose of providing "its audience with access to a consciousness-expanding interaction with higher energies" (*RP* xxi). When the performer communicates the character's emotion through the voice, face and body, the audience and performer alike share in a moment of transcendence, a moment of integration. Meredith Monk, in the foreword to *The Radiant Performer*, describes the lyric theatre experience:

> Music theatre presents a situation in which everyone (the audience as well as the performers) can be openhearted, awake, and radiant. If for that one or two hours, each of us can experience feelings that we may have forgotten or see/hear things in a fresh, vivid way, then our lives will have been changed -- enriched. We will go back to our daily living with a new understanding of what we are missing, what we cannot do without. (xii)

Opera singers, through the glory of their voices, have been transporting audiences for centuries, but today's theatre audience is accustomed to more naturalistic techniques from actors, says Balk. Film and television reinforce the trend toward realism. To capture some of that media audience opera singers must take a more realistic approach to acting. Balk points out the complication that arises:

> ...but suddenly we asked them to do something different: to sing and act ...[but] we neglected to do one important thing: we didn't tell them how to do it....(*RP* 47)

His system is aimed at drawing a natural performance from an unnatural medium. The complete singer-actor should be able to "communicate peak experiences comfortably and convincingly" (*PP* 8). In *Performing Power* he explains how his system prepares the singer to meet this challenge:

> We do not want to see vocal effort reflected in the face, but we want a vocal effort that conveys the size and splendor of the operatic experience. We want a free, natural face....We want to experience the natural body, alert and responsive, ready to act on any impulse....We want the breath support system within that overall kinesthetic system to be functioning at maximum energy and efficiency. (186-187)

He attempts to reconcile but never to compromise emotional and vocal demands of the art with the demands for acting credibility. He calls for a "triple dominant performance" in which the performer has the power and flexibility to communicate through the voice, face, and body without endangering the voice or distorting the physique (*PP* 264). Apart from the emotional intensity of opera, the form offers another problem, that of the convention of time: "Time must be stretched, but it must seem to be natural" (*CSA* 55). This stretching of time occurs in arias, solo moments when "time stops or bends back upon itself" (*CSA* 79). The singer must fill the time emotionally and carry the action forward. This five or even ten minute "moment" could be a kinesthetic nightmare if the singer simulates emotion through tension; it could be also be a "star turn" if the singer is unable or unwilling to integrate the "hit tune" into the story line. The singer-actor must have the imaginative capacity as well as the technique to make the stylized form of opera work for the audience. Balk requires that this stylization be "firmly grounded in the performers' *relaxed* sense of their own being" (*CSA* 21). This is not a call for the singer to act naturally without any other directive. His call for authenticity he matches with a call for skills:

> Authenticity comes when the skills required for a style are mastered so completely that they seem natural to the person doing them. If you can perform anything with great ease, it tends to be convincing on that basis alone. (*PP* 99)

Once the singer-actors have mastered these skills, they must use them to lead the audience through the form of the work. The audience will follow the performer's concentration; thus it becomes the singer-actor's duty to learn how to direct focus. Balk talks specifically of the role the eyes play here, "...if they wander we feel the mind wanders" (*CSA* 69).

Balk explains in detail how to convey shifts in thought through eye focus so that the performer can lead the audience through the character's thought process. Focus, he explains is "simply the performer's eye-body language which tells the viewer that concentration has been achieved" (*CSA* 72). In *Performing Power* he describes the variety of focus available: the moving focus, fixed focus, eye shutter (closing the eyes to search inwardly), light bulb (a new thought dawns), environmental focus and the vision (164-167). Thus, it appears, the singer must bring a certain analytical ability to the task of selecting the character's focus.

Another task for the singer-actor is to unite the musical meaning and the actions of the libretto. In making these musical meanings specific, the performer "provides the connecting link between the theatrical reality and the musical transcendence of the work" (*CSA* 45). The singer-actor, with the aid of the coach, can work through questions Balk sets out regarding the musical interpretation of the dramatic structure: "...what does a sudden modulation mean dramatically? what is the dramatic implication of a change in rhythm...." (*CSA* 81). Questions regarding how the music defines the character also appear in his final book (*RP* 354). These are questions, however, that might lead to a specific interpretation of a role, while Balk is more interested in having the performer engage in free play to open the possibilities for several interpretations.

Not every role will demand infinite possibilities, however. The performer does have to exercise common sense concerning which choices are, indeed, possible for that character. Balk lists questions that help the singer-actor arrive at an understanding of character through a study of the libretto and score. Such questions as "What changes take place in my character during the story?" and "Is my character physically expressive?" appear in a section titled "Completing the

Knowledge Baseline: Character Awareness" in the final section of *The Radiant Performer* (354-357).

The section on character awareness re-iterates questions regarding the action and dominant mood of the story and the character's place within the structure which he included under "Focusing on Stylistic Skills" in *The Complete Singer-Actor* (194-195). There Balk places the focus on the integration of the opera's style and the performer's personal style.

Balk does not mention that the singer-actor might explore resources beyond the libretto in order to arrive at a better understanding of character:[1]

> ...the problem is not to understand the meaning of something; in most cases we have the verbal meaning of the material we are performing. (*RP* 326)

The singer's concern should be with *how* to express it (*PP* 18). But how comfortably, and how convincingly, can a singer-actor portray a character when bewildered by the character's actions? At Banff during the summer of 1993, for instance, a soprano found it hard to commit herself to Donna Elvira who kept submitting herself to more and more abuse from Don Giovanni. When she and the assistant director discussed popular self-help books about women who stay with abusive men, the performer began to make sense of Elvira's masochistic tendencies and played off the misogynist that one of the two actors playing Giovanni had made of his character.[2] For Balk such intellectual analysis and the search for motivation is not necessary. The singer-actor must translate through the imagination the coach's call for changes in speed, intensity or texture so that the instructions connect with "personal, validating energies" (*CSA* 86). The choices made must appear to be sensible ones for the character. Indeed, making sense of what is requested is the key task for the student of Balk's system:

> The true skill of the singer-actor lies not in the ability to ask why something must be done but in the ability to make sense of it. Whether one agrees with the concept is immaterial; how to make it work for one's self and the audience *is* the point. (*CSA* 61)

He says this in the context of making an exercise with arbitrary attitudes work, but it applies as well to the work the singer-actor does with the conductor and director. Balk does not promote the training of a singer who can present a definitive interpretation of a role. Instead, he wants a performer who is flexible enough to take direction and make it work. The singer-actor does not ask "why" but "*how*" to respond to the demands of libretto, musical score, director and conductor.

Balk hesitates when it comes to giving specific examples of how the process can lead to a product lest his book join the many volumes written on how to perform arias. He writes, "I find the philosophy behind the idea disturbing" (*PP* 244). However, he does offer a few examples to show how performers can apply his system and give credible renditions of Tamino's "Dies Bildnis" from *The Magic Flute* and the Countess' "Dove sono" from *The Marriage of Figaro*. He suggests choices for each of the facial/emotional and kinesthetic modes appropriate to the emotional content of the scenes. In doing so he looks at the given circumstances. He suggests how punctuation in the music and image changes within the text indicate thought changes, and he suggests what eye focus might help the audience follow the character's thoughts and which gestures might underline a moment:

> This stillness could be maintained from bars 1-18, or a hand could gently steal up to the face as though remembering the youthful count's loving touch. If so, this gesture would drop (bar 19) as the Countess returns to the image of the painful present. (*PP* 261)

This is an example of the product that might arise from playing with the possibilities.[3] Balk wants the performer to come to know the role through an intuitive, right-brain approach. The left brain can then monitor, edit and guide what intuition reveals.

No matter how proficient a singer becomes in acting, for Balk, above all else, a singer sings:

> Singing is the basis of the form; although the physical and emotion-projecting skills are also vital aspects of it, the most important reason for isolation and re-integration of the three art skills is to allow the singing function to be optimally supported and aided by the other two [the face and body]. (*PP* 295)

NATURE OF THE SINGER AS ACTOR

Asking how the performer comes to know the character is, perhaps, a more appropriate question for Balk's system than inquiring how the singer analyzes the text. In *Performing Power* he seeks an alternative route to what he calls too much intellectual control:

> From its beginning, this century has seen an intellectual search for internal answers. It has been called the psychological century....As the stress on verbal-intellectual analysis has increased, the singer-

> actor has been especially affected. Unlike other arts, in singing-acting the performer is his own instrument. The mind, which is an integral part of that instrument, is asked to focus on itself. The result is a tangle of self-conscious, judgmental control patterns that diminish the performing power of countless performers. (xiv)

Rather than approaching a role through an initial intellectual analysis of the text and score, the performer should try a "serendipity-oriented approach" which Balk describes for the performer preparing the role of Carmen:

> 1. Play into the unknown of Carmen's behavior with the voice, the face, and the body. Don't plan -- simply do things you have never done. Do this several times.
>
> 2. From the experience of doing it, select those that seem to be the most potentially useful and do them again.
>
> 3. Practice them until they become a known. (Again, they may be usable before they become known.) (*RP* 19)

He encourages the actor to move into the unknown with the body, voice and emotions and "have an energy experience that will then interact with whatever knowledge one already possesses" (*RP* 19). Undoubtedly the performer will bring considerable knowledge of such a popular role as Carmen, but that performer will be able to explore the role before acting from pre-conceived notions or imitating previous performances.

This might be a particularly effective way for the kinesthetic-dominant learner to get inside a role (*PP* 232). In a section entitled "The Cutting Edge of the Movement toward Knowing: Infinite Play for Instrument and Interpretation," Balk suggests how to work gesture and facial flexes into the memorized aria using the spiral technique:

> [Move] back toward the known until the flex was sufficiently modified to blend with the known and "made sense" again; from that point, one could move back toward the unknown, carrying the meaning along with that movement as far as possible, but allowing it to drop when necessary as one continues the expansion, returning to the known again and so on. (*RP* 359)

Sometimes, after a free play session, the interpretation takes care of itself, and the most appropriate reading emerges of its own accord. These perceptual and projective modes -- hearing/vocal, facial/emotional and kinesthetic -- have intuitive "minds" of their own. They can release flashes of insight into character that the intellect, in trying to predict an outcome, might block. Allowing the externals to play through arbitrary exercises, for example, singing an aria faster than is indicated or even singing it nasally, might bring a new insight to the role. In *The Radiant Performer* Balk encourages singers to explore vocal tone that varies from the "perfect, pear shaped vocal sound" (309). An arbitrary gesture or an arbitrary facial mask might provide a spark too. He looks for a balance with the intellect that will help co-ordinate the efforts of the "three intuitive minds" without trying to predict an outcome (*PP* 25). He is constantly encouraging the performer to do a new skill without worrying about whether or not it makes sense yet. After hearing the voice in action ask, "What needs to be added to what we just heard to allow the reading to make sense?" (*PP* 115).

In *Performing Power* Balk suggests "hearing" the sense in the line before imposing sense on the line (*PP* 112). The performer can reach interesting insights that would not have emerged had the singer followed the rut of working for an intellectually determined product. Balk always opposes a premature demand for closure: "...personal power diminishes in the predictability of our choices" (*RP* 341).

In *The Radiant Performer* he includes questions on the facial and physical expressivity of the character and how they can be used to communicate the internal qualities of the mind and emotions. He concludes the section with two questions related to the key issues of choice and flexibility:

> 19. Having done all (or part) of this MIM [mental intellectual mode] based analysis, am I able to release it and explore, without resistance, other choices suggested by directors or coaches?
>
> 20. Am I able to explore other choices with my body and my face, even though they seem contradictory to MIM's analysis? Am I able to blend those new, seemingly arbitrary choices with the more logical, analytical ones? (*RP* 355-356)

Questions of aria/ensemble awareness help the performer fit the aria into the context of the opera.

Balk assumes the singer-actor can come to a general understanding of the text and states that it is not necessary for the performer to analyze the script:

> The playwright has already done the left-brain work creating the logic and analytical structure that make the meanings clear. All the performer has to do is understand that logic, not recreate it. This is often a confusion about this concept of re-creation: the thought of the playwright in creating the character is one thing, involving all sorts of understandings about

> unconscious motivations that are not part of the character's thought process; the thought of the character is a different concept from that of the playwright, and it is expressed through music as well as words. This music is the performer's primary creative contribution. The words and the music *are* the meaning, regardless of the performer's actual thought process. (*PP* 97-98)

But what Balk means when he refers to analyzing the script is quite puzzling. His references to the unconscious motivations of the playwright suggest involvement in the intentional fallacy.[4] He does not consider having students concentrate on events that drive the action and involve character both dramatically and musically in the work itself; instead, he warns them about being side-tracked by the author's motivations. Unlike a straight play, the libretto has already been scored by the composer. The singer cannot follow the natural impulses to create his or her own score of the libretto. One wonders whether a separate study of the libretto and score would highlight for the student the composer's concept of the story. Balk does not touch upon this. Possibly such an exercise is for the director and conductor to pursue.

Balk's system aims at radiant performing -- a peak experience, flow, transcendence, -- for both the audience and performer:

> Radiant performance is made possible in moments of fulfilled performing potential, when all the parts of the performing process -- mind, emotions, voice, body and face -- are synchronized, integrated, and aligned....When the mind is one with the mind of the character being portrayed, is "in love" with the character, and is free of its potential controlling interference with other parts of the performing process; when the emotions are also at one and in

> love with the character; when the voice, body, and face are each free to respond to and express the character's thought and emotions with their full potential power and flexibility, and are also free of any interference with each other's process and can work together as a coordinated and integrated team; when all this is so, we have fulfilled performing potential and the conditions for radiant performing. (*RP* 5-6)

It seems from this passage that Balk would have the performer "become" the character. Yet, recall that Balk was transported by a tenor who was focusing on his technique.[5] A technique that allows seeming spontaneity in response to circumstances is a more likely goal. Balk points out the difficulty of identifying with operatic characters while meeting immense technical challenges:

> How many of us, onstage in performance, have not found ourselves facing some of the following problems? By preparing for a difficult note or passage, we have dropped character for several minutes; or by totally immersing ourselves in a role, we have not been together with the conductor for many measures; or in gluing our eyes on the conductor, we have become so preoccupied with that togetherness that, through vocal carelessness, we have managed to emit some bloodcurdling sounds! (*RP* 24)

Balk's method seeks to release vital energies -- physical, psychological and vocal. For him energy flow rather than identification with the character is key: "Whatever inhibits the flow of energy interferes with one's charisma" (*CSA* 53). Through his technique the performers may "convey emotion even though they do not *feel* emotion" (*CSA* 52).

Balk believes the intensity of operatic emotion can cause interference with singing especially when the singer equates emotion with tension in the body. If feeling the emotion for the singer means locking the body and interfering with the breath support system, the singer is in trouble. Remember though, emotion is key to Balk's system. He speaks in *The Radiant Performer* of the musical coaches looking for the heart and soul of the music from some inner organic process. They often call for the singer to feel the emotion as do teachers of the American "Method" school of acting:

> The nature of that inner process seems to involve emotion. It is not an intellectual process, but has to do with deep feeling of some kind. Moreover, it is feeling that tends to interest us most as audience members: an actor's ideas may be sound, his thinking clear, and his intellect powerful, but unless he also feels deeply, and projects it well, we will not be intensely compelled by what he has to communicate. (313)

These coaches, he warns, seem confused about how the energy system functions to express emotion. When singers tell him they cannot cry and sing, Balk corrects them by saying they "cannot *not* cry and sing, that they cannot arouse the emotions to that pitch, then inhibit them and still sing" (*CSA* 56). In *Performing Power* he explains how a singer can become physically entangled when suppressing an emotion by calling on the reader's memory of a suppressed cry:

> The commonest example of this phenomenon is the involuntary and often painful contraction of the throat muscles to keep from crying. A similar action occurs with the facial muscles. We tighten the jaw, keep a stiff upper lip, stare with unblinking eyes, and generally keep the face impassive when we do not want to show emotion. By doing so we also prevent ourselves from feeling the emotions fully. We feel the repression, but not the expression; whether a repressed emotion is actually felt is a moot question.

> (*PP* 152-153)

Whether the singer has to feel the emotion in performance is also a moot point. Balk is concerned with how the singer can make an emotion work as an energizing agent. First, it will be helpful to explain some acronyms that Balk uses. The "inner emotional process" he calls IMP. The "mental intellectual mode" is MIM. HOBS is the "higher observer" that helps MIM see things in the context of the whole energy system. An arbitrary attitude such as anger might start the process in motion:

> ...an attitude, say anger -- is a message to MIM -- in mind....It is a message to IMP as well (and to the body, the face, and the voice -- all of which have intuitive understandings of how that emotion is expressed).... (*RP* 252)

In another section he describes how the anger impulse is channelled productively:

> As IMP feels anger, and MIM feels guilt for the anger, HOBS can help MIM see the anger simply as energy with many choices for release, and aid MIM in dropping the guilt and concentrating on choices in transforming and directing the energy of IMP rather than trying to repress it. (*RP* 23)

Thus anger, an emotion that might cause tension in the singer is translated into energy. A performer can play characters like Macbeth and Iago without entanglements. The crucial difference is that these characters are trapped by the situation while the performer has choices:

> The experience of a person who allows rage to flow through his system but who is truly free to make many other choices in expressing that rage, is different -- for the person as well as for observers -- from that of a person expressing rage in the same

> way, but who has no choice in the way it is done, or who does so from an entangled condition (which is also choiceless) ....In performance we can learn to practice choice commitment without being trapped by identification with our choices. (*RP* 345-345)

Balk cites research by Joseph Ledoux to show that emotion precedes thought to reaffirm his outside-in technique. Balk concedes that Stanislavski was right when he said the actor cannot make emotion happen. Stanislavski's early work has the actor summon emotion memory before doing an action. In his later system, however, Stanislavski advocates a method of physical actions wherein the doing of the action stirs the actor's inner response. But whereas Stanislavski has the actor play the scene and act out the character's moment-by-moment actions, Balk uses arbitrary physical movements and emotion attitudes to release energy.

Balk's arbitrary gestures and attitudes resemble Joseph Chaikin's "sound-and-movement" exercises devised for the Open Theatre in the 1960s. Robert Pasolli, in *A Book on the Open Theatre*, explains that Chaikin's exercises evolved from Nola Chilton's work. She sought a physical method to help actors connect with characters in non-naturalistic material for which "Method" training had not prepared them (3). Although Chaikin's exercises aimed at building ensemble, the effect the exercises produced on the actor's inner feelings is similar to Balk's anticipated effect. Chaikin has actors work in pairs. One actor makes a purely impulsive action to which another actor responds impulsively (4). Conscious choice is avoided. Pasolli describes the effect of the impulsive actions on the actors:

> ...sound-and-movement is an abstract statement generated by kinetic impulse rather than emotional impulse. But while it does not come out of emotional experience, it does lead into it. The action, in short, engages the emotion rather than the other way around. Thus the actor must open himself to the emotional experience to which his action leads him; otherwise, as in all schools of acting, his work will be lifeless even if technically correct. (6)

Balk's arbitrary attitudes are similar to Chaikin's predetermined emotions. The actor starts with the emotion and "seeks the expression of the line in sound-and-movement" rather than acting out a predetermined action to correspond with the emotion (7). Balk does not mention Chaikin's exercises; however, he does mention Pasolli's book (*CSA* 237).

Although Balk uses imagination exercises in *The Complete Singer-Actor* connected with emotion memory, he does not dwell on Stanislavski's objectives. Such a naturalistic, causally connected system is, perhaps, too product oriented for Balk. In *The Complete Singer-Actor* Balk works for a connection between self and character by comparing how they both might act in the given circumstances. Even in this first text Balk moves beyond an intellectual exercise:

> But it is not an intellectual question to be answered only in the head. It is a body-and-voice-in-action question which must be answered by physical, emotional and vocal thinking as well. (91)

The route Balk chooses in *Performing Power* is through an external technique. He cites research done (date not given), using actors, at the University of California at San Francisco to verify his approach of triggering internal responses through external expression. These actors were given instructions to contort their faces in various ways without being told what they were simulating while their pulses and skin temperatures were monitored. They then "acted" the emotions that they had previously signalled facially. Balk reports that the mechanical results registered closer to reactions of those actually experiencing fear than did the "acted" emotion (*PP* 356).

This experiment is similar to work Balk does with his students in external facial mask to summon up inner emotions. He includes an anecdote of a mezzo-soprano finding her way into the role of Baba in Menotti's *The Medium*. She created strong facial masks of anguish and horror which Balk had her hold while releasing the tension. She speaks of the experience: "When you gasped, I felt my own gasp inside at the effect my face had on my emotions" (Qtd. in *PP* xv). A singer who was not particulary fond of the psychological probings of the "Method" technique approves of Balk's modes technique: "Thank God for a way of working which doesn't try to get you to spill your guts all over the stage" (Qtd. in *PP* xv).

Before the demand for more realism the singing actor had an easier time of it:

> The old-time operatic ham, lacking the inhibitions which, depending on one's view, curse or bless the contemporary singer-actor, simply charged in with a series of splendidly overdone gestures and poses, and got away with it. And in making those gestures, the ham primed the pump a bit, and thereby activated the feedback process, reviving some useful emotional energy. Today we worry intensely about the emotional impulse, but we do not allow ourselves to prime the pump physically and get the feedback process started. That is an unfortunate limitation, because it is objectively easier to perform an external

> action and accept whatever emotional response it evokes than it is to arouse a specific manifestation by means of an emotional impulse. A strong physical movement is far more likely to evoke automatic emotional feedback than is a thinking process to evoke a desired physical response, especially a response that is specifically stylized. (*CSA* 22)

According to Balk we all have a well of energy to be pumped. He tells us that "feeling is constant; external style is variable" (*CSA* 31). In *The Radiant Performer* he speaks again of "the universally available flow of creative, intuitive, nonverbal energies" (373). In both instances he makes a plea to hone techniques and thus tap into the energy source.

One way to activate the emotions is through arbitrary exercises. He produces flash cards that require students to respond vocally, physically or facially to requests for expressions of anger, joy, fear, etc. (*RP* 251). Arbitrary attitudes are preferred as the intellect will suggest logical ones. Arbitrary ones will give more possibilities (*PP* 169). In *The Complete Singer-Actor* he acknowledges that actors playing attitudes are "guilty of generalizing, of playing an emotional wash," but that a singer's attitudes add nuance to a highly specific musical score (62). He explains why this exercise works:

> ...we *know* (not just have knowledge of) each of those emotional states from personal experience (or observation) our biocomputer is filled with inner, personal, experiential information that allows us to express the emotional states as well as feel them. (*RP* 25)

A problem arises when social conditioning causes the performer to confuse the suppression of the emotion with the expression of it; holding patterns block energy flow. If the singer is not able to work through this tension with a teacher or an Alexander practitioner, Balk suggests a number of self-help books or classes in the Radiance Technique in *The Radiant Performer*.[6]

Sustaining an emotion in opera puts a strain on the performer. To alleviate problems Balk suggests exercises to transfer the task of "showing" the emotion to the face. The actor must learn to hold the mask without tension. In his third book he acknowledges that the voice too can convey emotion without entanglement when the technique is secure (*RP* 317). Then the body is free to gesture without becoming tense through an obligation to feel the emotion. Balk states that in any case the gesture alone cannot communicate clearly:

> Physical and gestural statements by themselves are much like music: a form of pure undefined energy waiting to be defined by the human circumstances -- the face, the voice, and the situation. (*PP* 190)

The face of the singer-actor receives considerable attention in this system:

> ...The facial emotional mode can be trained to carry the burden of the time extension....let the emotion be a thought, not to try to show it but simply to let it be there in the mind. This is the flicker, the inner impulse that needs to work its way out. (*PP* 159)

The emotion is still the starting point. It seems a simple matter to allow the face to reflect this inner impulse. It is not, according to Balk. The act of singing brings with it strange facial contortions in the early stages: raised eyebrows, puckered brow, bulging eyes. When the vocal technique is free such distortions should not occur. In an attempt to counteract these tendencies, the teacher has the singer use a neutral face to keep the singer from looking like a rank amateur. Balk calls this the SAD face: "serious (singing is serious business), anxious (I hope I don't do it wrong), deadpan (whatever I don't show can't hurt me)" (*RP* 236). Such a face is not open to receive the "flickers"[7] of dramatic impulse that might arise in rehearsal or performance. Add to the SAD face societal conditioning which conceals emotion, and Balk says work has to be done with the face so that it can trigger emotion for the actor and convey emotion to the audience. He cites examples of singers being astonished by emotional responses to mask play. One such example has a singer lower her eyebrow to convey a look of anger, an emotion she had been trained to keep in check. The lowered eyebrow triggered the feeling of anger in her according to Balk's impressions. She was able to work with that to change the impression and expression of the song from a sense of hurt to one of anger by lowering her raised eyebrow (*RP* 263-264).

If the singer is taught to sing in the "correct" body posture as well as with a neutral face, there will be problems. Exercises can stimulate inner emotional impulses, but, Balk states, "We must not place upon the inner the responsibility for communicating its messages. That responsibility belongs to the outer...." (*RP* 319). He calls for a "need to nurture" the inner process and exercise it as one end of the full spectrum. Balk proposes working sensory recall through his spiral process to draw upon its energy and to eliminate residual entanglements that emotional memory sometimes brings with it (*RP* 259-260).

Balk tries to balance the role of the intellect in the acting process. In referring to work in right- and left-brain research by Nobel Prize winner, Roger

Sperry, Balk draws upon the idea of two kinds of minds within the brain. He aligns his concept of three minds -- body mind, voice mind, and emotional mind -- with the more intuitive non-verbal right brain and warns of the tendency to favour the left brain:

> We tend not to trust what we cannot monitor with our verbal-intellectual mind, but developing that trust in our mode minds is an essential purpose of this work. (*PP* 354)

He advocates practising the hearing/vocal, facial/emotional and kinesthetic modes with arbitrary attitudes and gestures until the intellect knows that these mode minds can be trusted (*PP* 209). To the intellect he assigns the role of "coach or guide" putting it in charge of "analyzing, remembering, and imagining," but he warns:

> If MIM is wise as well as intelligent, she will allow them [mind modes] to carry out their own tasks in their unique and, often MIM-transcending ways. (*RP* 315-316)

The intellect, through the imagination, can make sense of results. By his third book Balk concedes the value of both approaches but still cautions:

> ...having knowledge of the character and situation is only that -- knowledge -- which must be transformed into communicative knowing through exercise. (*RP* 352.)

In a system named the "Pentagon of Preparation," Balk helps the singer-actor move from knowledge to knowing (*RP 350-361*). Students work through a series of questions and exercises that lead to awareness of their instrument and awareness of character and situation. Then they move to instrument exercise and expansion and interpretation exercise and expansion. Students move from knowledge through a "Field of Play" to "Radiant Performing and Knowing." The intellect, by analyzing, remembering and imagining, guides a process that permits the singer-actor to experience the role with the whole being and not just with the intellect. The section also includes questions that enable students to check whether they are interacting with others on stage and whether they are receptive to new ideas suggested by someone else.

The performer must also convey the structure of the character's thought process so that, rather than getting lost in an emotional wash, the audience can follow the action of the story. The singer must signal the divisions of an aria or ensemble with focus shifts. This task is assigned to the eyes:

> There is a parallel between the movement of the eyes and the movement of the mind behind those eyes. When the eyes are focused on a point, the mind is also focused on a single idea; when the eyes wander, the mind is wandering; when the eyes search, the mind is searching; when the eyes make a sudden shift of focus, the mind has made a sudden shift of thought or attention. (*PP* 164)

According to Balk, the eyes provide the structure or the FOCUS, and the facial musculature around the eyes or the FAMUS works to fill in the emotion (*RP* 232).

Balk devises exercises isolating the FOCUS to strengthen that capacity. And in those focusing exercises his students attest that the external approach brings an inner concentration (*RP* 227).

The singer needs an imagination to make sense of feed-back from physical exercises and the demands made of the performer by coaches and directors. But, according to Balk, authoritarian teaching has hampered the singer's imagination:

> When a young singer-actor says, as many have actually said, "I'm completely at a loss unless I'm told exactly what to do," one feels the depth of that need. But neither that individual nor his comrades-in-need are to blame. We have not allowed them to become participating artists in an enterprise that demands their participation. (*CSA* 85)

The Complete Singer-Actor promotes a nonjudgmental atmosphere with improvisation exercises using gibberish to foster a spirit of play. In the "Imagining" sections of his exercises he invites performers to fantasize about their environment:

> Are the forests made of hair, or sausages, or spaghetti? (*CSA* 185)

or

> Could I sing "Porgi amor" while imagining I was up to my neck in molasses without feeling as though I were desecrating either Mozart or opera? (*CSA* 185)

He includes opportunities for the imaginative use of props and stage furnishings (*CSA* 214).[8] To loosen musicians tied to the notion of getting it right, he introduces physical improvisations to music unknown by the students and calls for singers to improvise variations on a phrase (*CSA* 124).

His main work on the imagination is through arbitrary attitudes and gestures. The singer-actor must incorporate and make sense of what has been given and make it work. His texts include lists of attitudes and emotions that a teacher can call to a performer or that a performer can transfer to cards and then select randomly.

Such exercises in arbitrary attitudes enable the singer-actor to respond to spontaneous impulses:

> The body, face and the voice must all be prepared through exercise to be possessed by the flicker and to express its meaning. (*PP* 23)

If the actor is to respond holistically to an impulse, the actor must first master technique. Balk explains this by calling on a Zen image:

> First there isn't a mountain -- one is unconscious of technique; then there is a mountain -- one becomes strongly conscious of and even self-conscious about technique; then there isn't a mountain -- the technique is integrated to simply *be* while performing, with a minimum of monitoring. (*RP* 238)

He draws attention to the fact that even the charismatic Maria Callas left little to chance. She practised grasping the dagger with which Tosca would kill Scarpia fifty-four times in rehearsal before doing it "spontaneously" in performance (*RP* 293).

The way, then, to natural, spontaneous action is to practice it until it *feels* natural (*CSA* 30). Balk does not dwell on fostering intuition since he assumes everyone has it and states, "We will take the view that intuitive power, like radiant power, is present in everyone and only awaits release" (*RP* 364). That some intuition resides in the mode minds of the body and face has already been noted. Practice with them stimulates intuition. When he speaks of exercising the hearing/vocal mode he wants the performer to allow intuition to come into play by thinking with the voice in action rather than with the intellect:

> Although this is the goal, many hours are passed in process exercise and play with vocal musicality before a oneness of mind, meaning and music is realized.

> But this unity of intent, technique, and execution often happens surprisingly early in the exercise process, even if only for brief moments. (*PP* 117)

Balk does not advocate trying something new during performance, yet should something new arise, Balk encourages the performer to go with the impulse:

> ...there are times when the confidence in process and in one's ability to deal with choices has been sufficiently developed through exercise so that relatively unpractised ideas can be brought into the performance. This is the state of true performing power, when spontaneity and control exist together in perfect harmony. When it happens -- as it did three times with young performers in an actual production during the writing of this chapter -- it is a tremendously gratifying experience. But like all good things, it must be allowed and not made to happen. (*PP* 250)

To prepare the face and body to communicate the character's thoughts and emotions, Balk pays considerable attention to physical aspects of acting. To combat the neutral face, the one "programmed to be a vegetable," he has the singer work with extreme facial masks:

> The use of Kabuki or Commedia masks while singing is the equivalent of the kinesthetic exercise, in which a powerful gesture is initiated and sustained without the tension that initiated it. The performer makes a mask, as extreme as possible, then sustains it with as little tension as possible while trying to let it feel "real" again, without losing the mask itself. At the same time, the performer keeps singing as one would without a mask. (*PP* 236)

The physical mask is actually the performer's own face.

This choice is different from the mask work of Michel Saint-Denis and Pierre Lefèvre whose students put on extreme character masks over their own faces. In a videocassette of recent classes with students of The National Theatre School in Montreal, Pierre Lefèvre noted: "The character mask allows an actor to explore outside his usual physical, vocal, age and even psyche range."[9] Balk's facial masks do that in part by allowing the actor to explore, through facial manipulation, some of the highly charged emotions that opera evokes. But Lefèvre uses the mask to highlight the character and put the actor in the background. A student in Lefèvre's class describes the effect: "When we wear a mask our personality is no longer there. So we have no choice; we have to love the character right away and forget ourselves." Lefèvre suggests this is right, "The play is not about you."

Balk does not put the performer in the background, nor does he use character masks. He works with the actual face for several reasons. The first is to break down inhibitions in an external way through face making; another is to release internally blocked emotions by externalizing them. A third reason is to have the performer sustain external signs of communication without tension. Balk also comments that the size of the mask, "a Halloween mask in scale," exposes entanglements (*RP* 243). Rather than leading to mugging and indicating, Balk's facial masks help the singer break the "residual effects of facial tension" (*PP* 175).

To release the singer's body rooted in the "correct" postural set and entangled through a desire to be more noble or imposing, Balk offers many exercises. Some of these convince the singer that it is possible to sing in twenty-five different positions, but balance between the support necessary for the breathing mechanism and relaxed readiness throughout the rest of the body is necessary.

Rather than working with a neutral mask that encourages the body to convey feelings through posture and economy of gesture to a large auditorium, Balk takes the responsibility for communicating emotion away from the body and gives it to the face and voice which, he says, can do the task with greater specificity. He tries to find a reason for the bizarre antics one sometimes associates with the opera singer:

> Perhaps the absence of facial/emotional mode specificity leads to the grandiloquent semaphoring and statuesque posing that is sometimes part of opera. (*PP* 257)

To counteract this semaphoring Balk works on gesture with his singer-actors. He points out the difficulty that the extension of time gives a singer. How long should the gesture last in relation to the musical and verbal phrasing? For the execution of the gestures he proposes a three-step sequential approach. The impulse phase should be executed "with swift softness" as in everyday life (*PP* 201). The gesture follows immediately after the thought (*PP* 203). The second phase, that of sustaining the gesture, has to cope with opera's time; therefore, it will be somewhat stylized. He reasons that the "naturalistic initiation and the stylized sustaining...allows the gesture to bridge the music-theatre continuum" (*PP* 201). For the final release, the hands can move directly to the sides, or to accommodate period costuming, the hands and lower arms can be held sightly out. A second manner of release for a large gesture would have outstretched arms return towards the body before moving to the next gesture (*PP* 205). He also provides for a "floppy release," a release that allows the performer to get rid of tension while executing a gesture.

Although he refers in his notes to nineteenth-century catalogues of gestures, Balk does not suggest his students study these. Instead, he turns to arbitrary cards that ask students to respond quickly to orders to touch the chest or raise an arm. Eventually the performers will expand their own gestural vocabulary through exploratory play (*PP* 212). He discourages the singer-actor from attempting to motivate the gesture as this will lead to what he terms the "lean" or "lift" and hence to body tension (*PP* 296-297). The singer-actor should just do the gesture:

> We can usually persuade the mind that it takes less energy to do the gesture simply by making the movements without meaning (and therefore without tension). We then learn to accept on the body-mind level that the gesture *is* the meaning and that it only needs specification and clarification by the voice, face, and situation -- all of which are outside the control of the kinesthetic mode. (*PP* 211)

Balk encourages the singer to get inside the character through the body with improvisations to music in *The Complete Singer-Actor*. In *Performing Power* he also advocates a physical approach and suggests, "physicalizing before singing, letting the body do the singing...[then] simply re-experiencing the physicalization in the mind as one sings" (232).

Balk is sceptical, though, about the value of movement and dance classes for the singer-actor. He cites evidence from his student days when fellow classmates took movement classes three days a week for three years without apparent carryover into their stage work: "...some of the actors did not move well...and showed no signs of improvement in that respect in the three-year period" (*PP* 182). He admits they were better conditioned after the classes if not better actors. Here, again, he calls for teachers to work for better integration of the skills a singing actor needs. Singers in many training centres must look for classes in movement and dance outside their department and extract what they can from programs designed to train dancers.[10]

In both *Performing Power* and *The Radiant Performer* emphasis is on the individual performer. In the latter book Balk includes a set of seven questions as a check list for the singer-actors to see how freely they can adapt to the suggestions and choices of others (361). While he stresses that his "Pentagon of Preparation" is a system for individual preparation, the performance does not consist of a sum of choices made by individuals:

> ...as we interact with others, their choices also become a part of our process. And our performing power will become interdependent upon our capacity to allow those new choices to interact freely with our personal field of choice potential. (*RP* 360)

Undoubtedly, practice in making sense of arbitrary attitudes, gestures and vocal exercises are expected to prepare the singer to respond with commitment to other members of the company.

Reference is made in *Performing Power* (76) to the fact that singers rarely look at each other while performing duets. Rhoda Levine made a similar statement to explain why she started the summer course at Banff with a week of daily improvisation classes in order to have the singing actors connect with one another. They had to listen and respond to the performer and not just to the line in the score. The exercises were especially important for recitatives in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which they were preparing. The frontal numbers, "six gun arias" aimed directly at the audience, and "park and honk" singers are not to be tolerated.[11]

Many exercises of *The Complete Singer-Actor* are acting-class exercises designed to build an ensemble. Mirror games and echo games encourage performers to form visual/aural connections with one another. Groups improvise spoken and sung scenes to gibberish, picking up on each other's energy levels (144). In "Round Two. Memorized: Coordinating," two performers from different scenes join forces to exchange dialogue from those two scenes. For this to work the actors must form an ensemble by listening very closely to one another and responding to what is actually happening rather than just waiting for a cue. The ninety pages of exercises that conclude the first text are ones found in many North American acting texts. Balk states a preference for Stickland's *The Technique of Acting* (*CSA* 233). Into these theatre exercises, Balk integrates the musical element.

During many years of training singers to act, Balk has become aware of the authority dependent training most have received. Consequently, his first aim is to loosen them up and encourage them to get in touch with their own resources. He hesitates, though, to take them from one autocratic system dominated by the demands of the musical score and the voice teacher's desire to attain the perfect sound to the American "Method" school of realistic acting:

> Their trained willingness to execute actions without relating them to human response may be the reason that academically trained singers are so often accused of being stiff when they act....Although music-theatre training must deal with this problem, it must not counteract it with a strong diet of internal naturalism, for this simply emphasizes the gap between feeling and technique. Instead we must find exercises that emphasize the relationship rather than the *separation* of opposites and that stress their interdependence rather than the gulf between them. (*CSA* 32-33)

The "Method," which Balk describes as a "kind of self-hypnotic technique" through sense memory or emotional experiences is authority dominated too: "But one only knew the attempt was 'successful' if Strasberg validated it by 'believing it.'" He also rejects Stella Adler's technique: "Adler's intuitive arousal approach...is strongly authoritarian" (*PP* 248-249).

Teachers who watch and listen to students for the sole purpose of correcting them can produce singers who are defensive or judgmental perfectionists. Hence Balk advocates a playful atmosphere of experimentation where there are no failures only opportunities to try. Here is his description of the teacher's job:

> It is the teacher's job to give honest, descriptive, but nonjudgmental and supportive analyses of the performer's work, thus nurturing growth whatever the performer's skill level. What is needed is the teacher-director-coach who can explore along with the performer, who can say, "I don't know the answer," who can respond to what has actually happened rather than what was supposed to happen, and who admits mistakes openly. (*PP* 125)

He wants a teacher who can work *with* a student who is thinking with the voice:

> For the teacher-director-coach, this means learning to *hear reality*, that is, hearing the sense of the line that actually emerges from the musicality rather than filtering the spoken words through a preprogrammed intellect. (*PP* 112)

He wants the teacher to explore with the student. If the teacher can describe without being judgmental, then students can work to bring the action into line with what they want to convey without worrying about how right or wrong the action is.

Balk admonishes the teacher who, instead of giving a student the tools with which to build a technique, points out the trouble spots and tells the student not to do the wrong action. Balk equates this with telling someone not to think about elephants, a difficult thing to do once the idea has been planted. Rather than telling the student not to do the behaviour that is causing the problem, the teacher, Balk holds, should give the student something specific to do; the student could do a positive action that will lead the singer out of the problem. Working on the positive action (or as Balk suggests, thinking about roses rather than not thinking about elephants), should lead the singer to concentrate on doing something rather than on *not* doing something (*PP* 4).

He would like the singer-actors to stop trying to do their best and to start reacting to impulse and their whole being. The voice is obviously of prime importance, but Balk suggests students brush off teachers who "pass on biases 'the voice is all that counts' " (*RP* 164). Play is the order of the day:

> If an immediate product is demanded by the teacher-director-coach or by the performers themselves, if they insist on something that works the first time, the results will be the same: a fearful, control-oriented,

> nongrowth situation. (*PP* 135)

In *The Radiant Performer* the spiral path approach offers the singer-actors a system whereby they can work on inner and outer aspects of performing independently. The approach acknowledges that "no voyage is linear" and that there are moments when the performer will stray off-course (141). It also gives students permission to be less than perfect in a previously mastered skill while learning a new one. What has been learned will come back. Equipped with a method of work the student/performer is more self-reliant and able to survive should working circumstances bring a director or conductor who is not the performer's ideal choice. Balk warns, however, against rejecting help and trying to survive alone:

> ...we do not discard teachers, coaches, directors, conductors, and guides in general -- for they are all parts of the whole and can contribute greatly to the move toward greater wholeness. But we can support that move more fully by freeing ourselves from the addictive authority dependence that has long plagued the field as a whole. (*RP* xxiv)

The coach should help the singer prepare several interpretations of a role to be ready for the conductor's requests: "...a Muti version, a Karajan version, a Mehta version, an Ozawa version, and a Marriner version" (*PP* 104). Balk wants a flexible performer.

Obviously, preparing several versions of a role will help prepare the performer for what might be the dictatorial baton of the maestro. The approach has advantages over the rut of having only one way to perform the role. Balk does not write of conductors or directors responding to and working from interpretations which singer-actors might offer.[12]

Balk calls for a cooperative group to support the singer-actor: a director who can see what is happening and the coach who can hear must acknowledge that neither is receiving the whole program from the performer; they must work together. If they do not cooperate Balk delivers this verdict:

> Every voice teacher, stage director, conductor, coach, acting teacher, and movement teacher who is thus aware and who continues to encourage or tolerate an uncoordinated, unintegrated voice-body-emotion response to the acting demand is guilty of first- or second-degree voice-murder.... (*PP* 299)

Because his books refer to the classroom and workshop and to the process that prepares the singer-actor for rehearsal, Balk rarely refers to the performance situation. He does, however, point out that opera should not compromise its form nor the singer the operatic sound in an attempt to broaden the audience appeal of opera:

> If one alters the style of opera to communicate with the musical comedy denominator, one has opera that is simply second-rate musical comedy....In making the form palatable to the general public we must not alter the basic components of the form itself, principal among which is the operatically gifted singer. (*PP* 280-281)

The operatic voice is essential. That gifted singer, however, can engage the audience's attention better by developing the kinesthetic mode which "helps the audience hear better by what it shows them" and helps the actor to a physical awareness of the music (*PP* 230). Through control of eye focus the actor conveys what is going on in the character's mind, and as the mind is very specific in its thought process, the focus must be very specific (*PP* 255).

The performer must sing and act within his or her capabilities "to leave room for the audience to imagine more exists" (*CSA* 97). The well-trained singer-actor permits the audience to use its imagination and knowledge of the circumstances. Indicating is not necessary: "It is a sign that the actor does not trust the simple truth of the role" (*CSA* 57).

The singer-actor must engage the audience emotionally in the opera; that is the performer's chief function. Yet when tension becomes too much for the performer, Balk suggests a "floppy release" to allow the singer to eliminate tension in the body (*RP* 288-289). Simultaneously, the singer projects the release of emotion to the audience as well. They will accept the release as a normal gesture of the character and will experience the relief from tension as well (*RP* 286-287). The committed opera singer, then, controls the audience by drawing it into the tension of the moment without permitting that tension to carry over into fear that the singer might at any moment lose control of the voice.

CONCLUSION

Balk is an acting teacher not a voice specialist; therefore, he leaves the nurturing of the vocal production to qualified teachers. His strength lies in seeing that acting technique helps rather than hinders the singer. As an acting teacher working with singers who are used to technical exercises, he devises a system that works in a way opposite to that of the American "Method" with its internal approach of arousing emotion by having the actor think the right thoughts. Thus, Balk's manner of leading the actor to emotional truth is an outside-in approach. He also attempts to counteract product oriented and judgmental training which, he believes, inhibits the imagination and drives feeling into a defensive position. Since opera is an intensely emotional art form, Balk gives singers an acting technique that triggers the emotion and allows the performer to work with the energy released by the emotion, thus eliminating the residual tension. He works to free the SAD face and the rigid body.

A relaxed and expressive face serves the performer well for television, film and small auditoriums, but one might want more work on body posture, in addition to the gesture work, to carry emotion to a large house. Although his method prepares the singer-actor for roles in operas that are given a fairly realistic presentation, his exercises offer little preparation for operas given a more stylized treatment. He has exercises that have students attempt to imitate the style of other members of the class "rather than a vague generalization about fashion in the eighteenth or nineteenth century" (*CSA* 160). Yet Balk never explains how the student becomes comfortable in the "style" of former centuries. He encourages students to draw their characterization from the music: "once the style of the music is sensed, move to it, gesture and physicalize it" (*CSA* 191). They also try to understand the period style from the music (*CSA* 192). To learn flexibility in style choices the students do an exercise in which "Each person moves from the most artificial, formal style to the most naturalistic style" (*CSA* 219). Balk dismissed formal dance classes as useless for actors. Opera students are not encouraged to take classes in ballet or period dance from which they could extract movements more specific to a particular period than the generalized directive "artificial, formal style" suggests.

Intuition and spontaneity of the body and voice are central to Balk's process since they free the singer from the rut of searching for the one "right" way of performing. The flexibility helps the singer adjust to the instructions of director and conductor. Through the imagination the singer can integrate these instructions. Undoubtedly the flexible performer adjusts more readily to performances of other members of the cast thus helping to create an ensemble.

Balk's system is an alternative to analytical approaches. From a system that professes to free the singer from authority dependency, the singer can learn a method of working independently. The singer-actor can experiment to release energy and test the new findings in a spiral approach that incorporates new elements and eliminates entanglements. The method leads to the discovery of a variety of choices that makes the singer-actor a versatile performer rather than a slave to his or her own limitations.

NOTES

[1] Eric Roberts, who recently enjoyed a success for his interpretation of Eugene Onegin with Opera Omaha, spoke in an interview of his problem when first preparing the role: "Why is he so priggish?" he wondered. Roberts' desire to make Onegin a more credible character, and if possible a more sympathetic one, led him to read Pushkin, the source of the libretto. From reading the original he was able to see a streak of fatalism not apparent in his character in the opera text. Thus he was able to colour the role with that new insight and portray Onegin as other than a prig. (Interview, Edmonton, 15 July 1993)

[2] Rehearsal, 21 July 1993.

[3] Several texts written to help singers interpret their arias are very prescriptive and highly restrictive. Boris Goldovsky and Arthur Schoep in *Bringing Soprano Arias to Life* give phrase by phrase blocking instructions for the arias in the text. They seem to equate dramatic action with stage movement. Martial Singher, in *An Interpretive Guide to Operatic Arias*, writes of the character's emotional situation in the circumstances and concentrates on the shaping of the vocal line through specific suggestions for phrasing and diction.

[4] See "The Intentional Fallacy" in W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., *The Verbal Icon*, (New York: Noonday Press, 1954) 3-18.

[5] See pages 18-19.

[6] Books listed in the reference section of *The Radiant Performer* include Shad Helmstatter's *What to Say When You Talk to Yourself*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) and Barbara Ray's *The Official Handbook of The Radiance Technique*, (San Francisco: The Radiance Technique Association International, 1987) and its sequel *The Expanded Reference Manual of the Radiance Technique*, (St. Petersburg, Fla: Radiance Associates, 1987). Balk recommends classes with a qualified teacher for those interested in the Radiance Technique since it is not something that can be learned from a book.

A book that musicians find helpful for getting themselves out of ruts in practising is Eloise Ristad's *A Soprano on her Head*, (Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1982). Balk mentions this book in *Performing Power*.

[7] The term "flicker" described as "that initial impulse of dramatic response within the actor" (*PP* 17), Balk borrows from Peter Brook. See *Performing Power* (17) and Peter Brook's "Flickers of Life" in *The Shifting Point*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

[8] Noticing the problems some singers were having with props during rehearsals for the 1993 Banff production of *Don Giovanni*, director Brian Macdonald bemoaned the fact that opera singers needed a course in "Props 101" (Rehearsal, 21 July 1993).

[9] *Pierre Lefèvre on Acting*, videocassette, (National Film Board of Canada, 1992).

[10] During class at the Banff Centre (8 July 1993), I observed the head of the opera division, a musical coach and the assistant director taking the movement and combat classes. There they learned first hand what the performers were doing.

[11] Rhoda Levine, interview, (Banff Centre, 6 July 1993). During this interview much of what Levine said about the problems singers have learning to act concurs with Balk's concern with authoritarian training:

> Singers are trained to go for straight A's and good reviews. I have to tell them to stop worrying about results. Stop being responsible. Just be there. Listen. Let the other person in. It's all right to bore me.

A little later she added, "And the reviews? They end up in the kitty litter."

[12] It was interesting to see Brian Macdonald work with both performers alternating in the role of Don Giovanni in Banff. Each brought a different interpretation to life without apparent conflict with the director or conductor. One singer had understudied the role and performed it in concert before the 1993 summer session. When asked whether previous performances locked him into an interpretation, he responded that he had specific ideas but was willing to be convinced by a director whose choices seemed more interesting and to pick up on other ideas for character choices that came from rehearsing with the rest of the cast. He and other members of the cast were prepared to be flexible but were not impressed by "theatre" directors who "laid on a concept" (Conversation with several members of the opera ensemble, Banff Centre, 21 July 1993).

CHAPTER 2

"WHEN SINGERS START THINKING, IT'S AMAZING WHAT THEY CAN DO"

LEON MAJOR AND THE MARYLAND OPERA STUDIO[1]

The University of Maryland offers a process-oriented program to the opera student. Based on aesthetics and conventions of realism, the program trains creative artists who work with the production team to discover the opera in rehearsal. Leon Major, head of the Maryland Opera Studio, came to opera from a theatre background. Born in Canada, he pursued theatre studies in England, Strasbourg and in a six-week session with the Berliner Ensemble. Until the early 1980s he thought of his opera directing as a sideline while he concentrated on theatre. Major has served as artistic director of the Neptune Theatre in Halifax and of the St. Lawrence Centre in Toronto. He taught at York University in Toronto and also conducted acting classes for opera students at the University of Toronto.

In addition to his academic career in Maryland, Major is active as a director. During the 1993-1994 season he staged operas for the Florentine Opera Company of Milwaukee, San Diego Opera and Washington Opera. In January of 1995 Major will travel to Italy where for six months in Brescia, located between Milan and Verona, he will hold acting classes for Italian singers. Major explained that the Italian opera community is concerned that film and television are cutting into the opera audience, and to compete, Italian opera singers are interested in improving their acting skills (Interview, 13 Nov. 1993).

Major developed an interest in the acting of opera as a young man working back stage. Recalling the visits of famous singers to Toronto, including Milanov, Tebaldi and Warren, he noted they sang splendidly but made no attempt to act. Maria Callas, on the other hand, did act in the production of *Tosca* he saw. The impact of a combination of powerful acting and singing made an indelible impression, as forty years later, Major is dedicated to teaching singers to act. The two-and-a-half-year program at the University of Maryland is designed to help technically proficient singers acquire skills necessary for them to realize their potential as actors.

The students in the Maryland Opera Studio appreciate the attention paid to their acting. One doctoral student returning to studies following several years of professional work in Europe explained his reason for coming to this program mid-career:

> Many directors told me they didn't want an opera singer on the stage; they wanted a character. I used to wonder why opera singers often look so bad. They do if no one teaches them to act. (Interview, 10 Nov.

> 1993)

This mature singer knew that through study he could rid himself of bad habits and improve his acting skills. The program, he said, would serve as a model should he be in a position to establish an opera workshop in his future teaching career. A young singer in his first year at the opera studio confided that after a few classes in the Maryland program, he has put away the grandiose "acting" he had assumed accompanied opera. Prior to this instruction, his intent had been to "wow" the audience with his vocal prowess. He was learning how to make a different impression with teachers who were helping him bring the character to life within the given situation (Interview, 10 Nov. 1993).

AIMS OF THE PROGRAM

In speaking of current trends in opera production, Major summarized the main approaches:

> There are two ways of doing opera at present. One is as a grand spectacle where the singers are in the right place to sing the words. The designer and director make the scene. The second way is that opera can be an ensemble wherein the singers make the scene. (Interview, 13 Nov. 1993)

The second method interests Major. He is not interested in a spectacle that dwarfs the singers or costumes that do the acting. Major explained his view of theatre in a newspaper interview with *Washington Post* critic Joseph McLellan in 1989:

> The reason I go to theatre is because I want to see people relating to one another -- I want to see what happens when one person encounters another in a given situation. If the costume or the scenery is so

> impressive that the person gets lost, I feel cheated....(Qtd. in *Toronto Star*, 7 Jan. 1989: H3)

In that same article Major spoke of an upcoming production of *The Barber of Seville* and praised its cast for their willingness "to become part of an ensemble which is, for me, what theatre is about."

To enable singers to become full, participating members of the ensemble, Major has designed a program which shifts its focus from lavish productions, which he observed in other centres, to training of the singer-actors. Not until a fifth semester do the members of the graduating class put all their skills together in a performance of a complete opera. Students perform in excerpts and work to develop entire roles in class as preparation for their final year. The casting for the major production(s) is done in March so that the students can become comfortable with the vocal demands of the role. They arrive at the five-to-six-week fall rehearsal period with preliminary work on character done, the role memorized and vocal difficulties mastered. During rehearsals the students participate in the discovery process with the director and contribute to blocking, choreography and the selection of appropriate stage business. Choices are often a group decision with students double cast in roles making appropriate compromises which enable those playing opposite them to follow one blocking score (Major, interview, 9 Nov. 1993). Rather than training singers to make sense of and interpret the instructions of directors and conductors, the Maryland Opera Studio process helps the singers become part of the ensemble, the creative team that brings the story to the audience.

Major's concern is that the graduates of the opera studio have the necessary skills to guide them through further development. These skills include the ability to use the voice musically and wisely and to develop characters based on the text and the music.

Whether the fourteen students selected each year will have operatic careers is beyond Major's control. The audition committee selects candidates on the basis of their solid vocal technique and potential for improvement through the school. This committee does not claim to be infallible. Major reported that a student with a splendid voice had to be dropped from the current production of *Figaro* because he was insecure in Mozart's recitative despite efforts of coaches to help him learn it (Interview, 9 Nov. 1993). A superb voice is not enough to secure a career in the opinion of the opera studio. Strong vocal skills and beautiful sound might carry a performer through an aria. But recitative requires sensitivity to the text and the other actor(s) in the scene. In an opera as long as *Figaro*, recitative also make demands on the performer's memory. Some members of the graduating class, on the other hand, demonstrated stage presence, good ensemble playing and beautiful singing, but had voices that would limit them to smaller houses in Major's opinion (Interview 13 Nov. 1993).

Until students are secure in their technique, Major hesitates to work dramatically with them. Singers at the undergraduate level at the University of Maryland are not in the opera studio but have an opera workshop which involves analysis of operatic performances in the Washington area. They also take acting classes with the theatre department as well as opera scene study and character development in an opera workshop separate from the workshop of the graduate students of the opera studio. Major believes that straight acting classes at the undergraduate level are extremely useful. He suggested that less experienced singers could prepare for the opera stage by paying more attention to the text in their early years of study. When asked whether such exercises as Stanislavski suggests in *Stanislavski on Opera* (13-31) regarding visualising the scene in folk songs and art songs might also be of benefit, he agreed that this together with the acquisition of acting skills from a straight acting class could be learned at an early stage. Students could then transfer these skills to literature that is more vocally taxing when the voice and the technique are ready (Interview, 9 Nov. 1993).

The singers in the opera studio fall into two categories: those working toward a Master of Music in Performance with an opera concentration and those special students who have begun professional careers but want to return to studies without pursuing a degree. Of the 1993-1994 first-year class, only two students came into the program after an undergraduate program. The others had completed vocal training at a more advanced level.

Because all the students in the opera studio are opera majors, the program runs as a conservatory rather than a typical graduate program in a state-funded American university wherein music students might take one class in opera to round out music studies. The students in each year of the Maryland program take classes together. These classes are arranged sequentially over four semesters to prepare the total performer through acting classes in contemporary theatre, in Shakespeare with actors from Washington D.C.'s Shakespeare Theater, and in plays from which operas have been written. The program includes classes in improvisation, mask work, movement, historical dance, combat and fencing. Opera scene study takes the students through arias, duets, ensembles and finally the entire role. In addition to their private voice classes, students study Italian, German, French and English diction, concentrating a semester on each language. They have a course in auditioning techniques and test their skills in mock auditions. The program also includes a course in stage make-up.[2]

In addition to this full load, graduate students take courses in solo vocal literature other than opera, vocal pedagogy, music research and other non-vocal music credits. It is also possible to combine a doctorate with opera studies; however, a doctoral student confided the opera studio was full-time in itself; he felt rather overwhelmed by additional course work and a teaching assistantship (Interview, 10 Nov. 1993).

Major concentrates on preparing the performer for a career and the eventuality of meeting different directing styles:

> You'll encounter traffic cops or directors who'll say "Let's do the scene." Then you'll have to figure out how to make it work. (Opera scene study class, 11 Nov. 1993).

Rather than giving the students opportunities to perform several full roles, Major gives them a method of working and practice in building characters through private work and ensemble discovery.

FUNCTION OF THE SINGER AS ACTOR

Whether in acting class, opera scene study, combat class or orchestral rehearsals, staff and students of the Maryland Opera Studio view acting in opera as an ensemble effort. The first-year students enjoy the group atmosphere of the opera studio. Singers usually work alone or on a one-to-one basis with a coach or voice teacher. But in the group atmosphere of the classes, the students claimed the uninhibited pulled the inhibited along. These students experienced group work of another sort as the first-year graduate students acted as stage crew for the two fall operas. The practice served a functional purpose for a department that has no technical program and limited resources. More importantly, the students learned that the success of a production depends on team work not only the brilliance of the chief performers in the spotlight. As members of the stage crew, students learn to give and share.

The Maryland Opera Studio offers a supportive atmosphere for the singers. In an interview Dominic Cossa, who has been singing professionally for thirty-five years, gave his views on encouraging students rather than placing too many demands on them:

> They have to have the fire in their bellies. It's better for them to find out sooner than later that they won't be professionals without drive. We have to help them be relaxed and channel that energy into something productive ....After all, we're not taming barbarians. (Interview, 10 Nov. 1993)

The approach is student-centred. A mature singer returning to school to improve his acting skills was very pleased that his voice teacher made no attempt to impose a new vocal technique on him. Instead, she acknowledged his strengths and worked to help him build on what he had accomplished.

Should a promising singer audition for the school and not meet the approval of the entire staff, the candidate might still be accepted if a teacher argues for the person's admission and agrees to accept the singer as a student. Usually the staff works in co-operation and agreement, but Cossa stated that there is enough disagreement to force re-evaluation of situations. They manage to come up with something that works for all.

Major has definite views on a director's role:

> A director has to establish an atmosphere in the rehearsal hall that is conducive to creativity and inventiveness that will allow it to happen, that will allow actors or singers to experiment, to try, to fail, to try again without worrying about the final results. Later you have to worry about it, but somehow there has to be that sense of freedom, that right to fail in the rehearsal period. (Qtd. in McLellan)

He expects his performers to work very hard but knows that improvement will be gradual not instantaneous.

So that the audience can enjoy a story told in a naturalistic manner, Major considers two factors important: the language in which the opera is sung and the size of the house. One production choice that helped the singers communicate the story of *The Marriage of Figaro* was the decision to perform it in English in deference to the audience that had to listen for three hours. Major prefers a good translation to surtitles for an English speaking audience who can then show its appreciation for the actor's comic timing. It is disconcerting for the performers to hear the audience respond to the surtitles before the singer has delivered the punch line. Major commented in the McLellan article: "...are you laughing at the jokes as delivered by the singer or...by the translator?"

It is fortunate that Major favours operatic performances in which the actors, rather than the scenery, do the work of storytelling because the converted concert hall where they perform has no fly gallery, no wing space and no orchestra pit. The hall itself seats fewer than three hundred. The intimate feeling of the auditorium was ideal for the Britten and Mozart operas presented in November 1993. The University of Maryland intends to build a new performing arts centre that will contain an eleven-hundred-seat theatre which the opera studio will share. Major considers this hall too large and would have preferred a theatre which seats between seven and eight hundred for his students. He considers the Eisenhower auditorium in the Kennedy Centre, where he staged *The Daughter of the Regiment* in December 1993, an ideal size for a professional house since the audience can see facial expressions as well as physical movements in a smaller venue. He believes there is a better chance of understanding a sung text when the singers are not pushed to vocal limits to produce a sound to fill an auditorium that seats two, three or even four thousand. The opera studio's realistic approach to acting and aesthetics appears to require a smaller theatre to accommodate successfully the goals of its program.

NATURE OF THE SINGER AS ACTOR

Just as Major respects his students, he insists his students respect their characters. When a light tenor suggested he had a problem with the "stupid" characters, like Nemorino in Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, whom he would be playing, Major interrupted him:

> Don't assign him the adjective "stupid"; subconsciously you'll work to prove you're right. Think of him as you would Hamlet. What does he want? Take it scene by scene. What does he do here? With *Daughter of the Regiment* do the same thing. Ask, "Who is this person?" Find the answer scene by scene not by the whole. Let us decide whether he's stupid. Let us decide whether Carmen is a bitch. We'll pass the judgment. The actor makes choices that the audience gets involved with, and the audience is smarter than you think. (Opera scene study class, 11 Nov. 1993)

Major drew a comparison with a drunk who tries desperately hard to convince everyone he's sober. Nemorino would not try to convince people he is stupid. Major's actor should not comment on the character but perform the character's actions and let those actions speak for themselves.

The fact that students double cast in *Figaro* presented characters with slightly different personalities supported Major's contention that the students work from their own individuality. Losing the person, to him, means losing the excitement. This statement echoes a similar statement by Stanislavski at his opera studio: "... don't try to get out of your own skin, or slough it off. If you get rid of yourself your show will be dead" (*Stanislavski on Opera* 277). Although the character is rooted in the student's personality, there is no attempt on the part of the student to "become" the character by experiencing the character's emotions as a "Method" trained actor might aspire to do. The student looks at the individual scene and asks what the character does in it. The student then plays the objectives of the individual moments. The audience, because it knows the dramatic circumstances and hears the music, reads the focused singer-actor into the role.

The ensemble approach of the opera studio with its emphasis on acting has many parallels with Stanislavski's opera studio as recorded in *Stanislavski on Opera*. Major states, though, that he is not following Stanislavski's system (Interview, 9 Nov. 1993). The method Major follows is not that of Stanislavski's emotion memory in *An Actor Prepares*. When asked what part emotion played in the singer-actor's performance in opera, Major gave his views: "The actor can't play it. You can't play being afraid. If another actor scares you, your response will come of its own." He does not use Stanislavski's emotion memory exercises as a means of having the actor invest emotionally in the role. This is not necessary; as an example, Major cited the originator of the title role in Britten's *Peter Grimes:*

> Peter Pears never plays the emotion.... Emotion is there in the music. There's a problem if the singer gets seduced by it. It's boring. The intentions are more important.

Major also rejects Stanislavski's through-line leading to a super-objective. Stanislavski speaks of both emotion memory and through-line in *Stanislavski on Opera*. In rehearsals of Rimsky-Korsakov's *A May Night* water sprites are instructed to work from emotion memory:

> He advised each actress to recall something from her own past life which ended in tragedy and draw on it. Each of the water sprites must have gone through some such drama and is suffering from it. (298)

Stanislavski worked from a through-line of action using emotion memory to validate the emotion underlying the causally-connected units of desire or motives. At one point in the rehearsals of *A May Night*, Stanislavski encouraged the performers to work from the through-line:

> Search out the line of action that runs all through the opera, not only while you are preparing it but during all the time that you will be performing in it. Each stage production is valid only when all the works and situations flow into one main current. That is reality. (271-272)

Major has the students discover the character moment by moment in the individual scenes instead of referring to a through-line linked to a super-objective. Students in Major's program work to discover the character's actions by asking, from the character's point of view, "What am I doing?" They play those actions within the given circumstances of the scene. In rehearsal they score the role in terms of the character's thoughts and actions without considering a super-objective. In performance they play that score to create the illusion of being in the moment.

In *Creating a Role*, Stanislavski rejects his former method of role preparation through long discussions of complex objectives before the actor worked on the stage and also the tendency to validate each unit of motive through emotion memory. In the persona of Tortsov, Stanislavski explains how his new method of physical actions works:

> Call to mind each episode in the act; realize what actions each one consists of; follow through the logic and consecutiveness of all these actions. (220)

Stanislavski's actors would discover the actions in the doing of them during rehearsal and build the role from a compilation of the single actions. For Stanislavski the correct action would elicit a suitable emotion and give truth to the performance.

For Major, whether or not the performer experiences emotion is immaterial. In rejecting the through-line leading to the super-objective, Major accentuates the actor "in the moment." This approach encourages ensemble since an actor cannot react unless given the proper action to react to. Major's actor concentrates attention outside the self rather than on self-generated feeling. It demands the actor respond to others and not dwell on personal feelings. Thus, if one actor scares another, the one receiving the action might experience fear. Opera singers, who spend a considerable amount of time on stage alone during arias, focus on the character's thoughts and actions in such situations rather than on feelings. The focus links the singer-actor to the character and keeps the performer in the stage picture.

Although Major does not advocate working on emotion memory to effect an emotional release, Paul Douglas Michnewicz[3] does some exercises in acting class to help the actors invest objects with personal significance. He cited Manon's aria bidding farewell to her little table as an example of an aria that could benefit from this kind of work (Interview, 9 Nov. 1993). An incident in *The Turn of the Screw* allowed the audience to see an actor giving a prop significance. The Governess, in packing to leave her post, picked up a photograph from her desk and paused over it a moment before putting it into her bag. Was this a portrait of a loved one who would welcome her home? The moment seemed to offer her the last chance for redemption. Whatever the actor's intent or inner emotional state, she handled the prop with much more care than she might pick up an item considered to have been put there by an assistant stage manager.

During acting class (9 Nov. 1993), Michnewicz drew an actor's attention to a passage about rain and asked her to personalize it: "The murmur of the rain has to be very personal in you. What are you wanting when you hear the rain? Don't tell." The student's voice took on a new colour. He mentioned in an interview before class that this personalization "has to come from inside the actor, but it has to work very quickly .... the singer is tied to an orchestral score." Emotion memory, then, is one rehearsal tool. The students were not required to feel what their characters were experiencing to convince the audience of their involvement in the situation. The opera studio believed that, in these instances, a change of tone and a physical action conveyed emotion to the audience.

The emotional impact of the situation and the music is supposed to seduce the audience not the performers of the opera studio. During the operatic performance, the students rely not on emotion but on intellect to guide them through the work. This intellect, which analyzes the role in its preparatory stages and edits intuitive responses in rehearsal, designs a score of the character's thoughts and actions. By following the score, the students stay within the fourth wall of the stage picture and actively involved in the character's story without having to work for emotional identification with the character.

A private session (10 Nov. 1993) illustrates the guiding intellect at work. Major coached a second-year student who would sing the role of the Countess in *Figaro* for one performance with the third-year students. The main thrust of the coaching was to help her trust internal focus on the circumstances at that moment. She could then feel confident among the third-year students. Major instructed her:

> Just concentrate on the sequence of ideas. That will solve the nerve problems....Acting is internal. If the mind is working we'll watch.

With little movement of her body, the actor with her very expressive face (to which neither she nor the director paid any attention), took the audience through her recollections of happy days around the piano with the Count disguised as her singing teacher. She visualized scenes from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. Then, through the window, she saw her husband driving away. Her ability to envision these two scenes took her through the prelude of "Porgi amor," a segment of opera that is often a nightmare for the soprano. The audience has already met the rest of the major characters. The Countess enters alone and must hold the stage during a very long prelude before she sings.

For the Countess' second aria Major and the actor discussed what she was doing in the aria. She was justifying her actions to herself. She discovered herself in the humiliating position of having the whole castle know that she has to plead for her maid's assistance in getting her husband back. Although the Countess loves her husband, Major brought her into the circumstances of the scene: "Don't adore him so much when you're saying the situation you're in is his fault." During the first part of the aria she could recall the joys of love of a former time. Major encouraged her to move to a more positive action at the tempo change and to find a bridge to the reprise of the first theme. He expected the performer to find a reason for this reprise; this was part of her job. The only physical movement was a shift of eye focus to the other side of the stage during a slow thought change. The student focused on her internal argument and allowed the audience to observe her predicament. The splendid vocal line emerged as a result of the inner intensity and seemed a by-product of the scene rather than the purpose for it. If the student was nervous, there was no external evidence of it.

A student completing her Master of Music degree said she was able to carry the analytical approach into her coloratura mezzo repertoire from the early nineteenth century. She found she was able to motivate highly ornamented passages and cadenzas with such subtexts as "Take that!" and "So there!" The florid passages emanate from the actor's intent and not from the singer's virtuosity.

When asked whether Major found his approach effective for all opera including that of the baroque period, he paused. The opera studio had participated in Maryland's biannual Handel festival in 1990 with Handel's *Agrippina*, but Major did not think he would participate again. "Handel is a problem," he concluded. He continued to explain that his approach to acting worked best in operas where characters operate on a psychological level as we understand it today (Interview 12 Nov. 1993).

Major applies the principles of psychological realism to Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* and treats the major characters in that opera as complex human beings. The performer's intellect, as well as analyzing cause and effect relationships of a character's motivations and objectives, encompasses a visual memory and an imagination that allows the inner eye to see events such as the Countess has experienced in the past and events supposedly taking place off-stage. The performer, then, creates an illusion which the audience is invited to enter through its imagination. When the performer clearly conveys the Countess' embarrassment over her husband's amorous activities, the audience will follow the story and empathize with her. In addition, the intellect gives the performer security; the score of thoughts and actions worked out in rehearsal will work in performance.

The program emphasizes the imagination. In their first two semesters at the opera studio students participate in improvisation classes twice a week:[4]

> Improvisation stimulates the imagination which was squelched at about grade 6. The classes are to free you into playing and to bring out the child in you. You can't be a singer or actor otherwise. (Major, interview, 9 Nov. 1993)

Michnewicz supported this idea. For him, play breaks old patterns. He began his acting class with listening games.

In the first semester, music, painting and poetry act as stimuli for students. One assignment has them visiting art galleries to find a portrait or a painting with a character that attracts their attention. They then bring the character to life physically. The second semester introduces students to mask work as another approach to the inner life of the character. A class might have *La Bohème's* Mimi and Rodolfo don neutral masks and, to the scene's accompaniment, use their bodies and not their voices to discover character relationships in their first meeting. The neutral mask principally calls upon the body to make discoveries and tell the story. The students learn to trust instincts and use spontaneity as a tool in character development. The mask also teaches economy of movement and forces students to communicate through carefully selected postures and gestures without the use of facial or vocal expression. Opera singers often have to project their characters to very large halls and must do so with the presence of the entire body.

Movement and dance classes provide other opportunities for the singers to use the body imaginatively as they work in space. In a dance class (10 Nov. 1993) students experienced syncopated rhythms from Handel's *Rinaldo* and accentuated the rhythm in their movements. The school's prospectus, *Opera at the University of Maryland*, quotes Stanislavski from *Stanislavski on Opera* to support its stress on movement classes and Michel Saint-Denis from *Training for the Theatre* on the importance of work in improvisation (Appendix D).

Staff and students in the Maryland program work to create the illusion of spontaneity. So that the total instrument can respond to the character's thoughts, various components of the role are drilled until they become automatic. Michnewicz spoke of learning lines to get them to an automatic state:

> Run the lines like scales over and over. Flex them, then just let the scene flow. You can't manipulate them or you'll get into problems. (Interview, 9 Nov. 1993)

Ideally, the lines will respond to the thoughts of the character through the objectives the actor has scored, and the singer-actor will respond to the work of others in the scene.

Voice teacher and Italian diction coach Dominic Cossa calls for a similar approach in preparing an operatic role: "Work the details so that diction is idiomatic, phrasing is natural, the vocal technique is in good order." When the singer-actor plays the actions of the scene, what follows seems natural. Neither teacher is suggesting drilling line readings or that there is one right way to perform a phrase. On the contrary, the process of singing and acting is extremely complex when the singer-actor has to appear spontaneous in a score that the conductor is controlling from the orchestra pit.

This drilling is antithetical to Stanislavski's teachings in opera. In *Stanislavski on Opera*, Stanislavski instructs the tenor singing Levko in *A May Night*:

> That was just any tenor singing and we have to have Levko, who in the enchantment of this night, is tired from being pursued, who is resting here after all the fights and dances, and who, besides, is still dreaming about Hanna. All this must be conveyed in the very sound of your voice.
>
> But do not attempt to substitute the sweet timbre of your voice for your beautiful feelings. *Make it a rule: when you are learning the text and music of a role, be extremely careful not ever to go over it by rote, but always combine it with the inner*

> *course of your part. Relate the enunciation, the text, the music, all to the through-line of action that goes through your whole role.* (293)

In *Creating a Role*, Stanislavski wants the actor to be precise in the objectives and actions but to allow details to fall into place of their own accord:

> ...come every day and go over, if not the whole scene, at least its basic outline. Let this strengthen more and more the basic objectives and actions, fix them with greater precision, like signposts along a road. As for the details, the small component parts with their adaptations and their execution, do not think too much about them; rather do them impromptu each time. (148)

Having the students master the text and musical score as Michnewicz and Cossa would have them do suggests that, for them, some aspects of the performance have to be ingrained in memory and vocal muscle memory before the performer is free to concentrate on the action of the scene which permits responses to emerge spontaneously. In this respect they agree with David Mamet's teachings as recorded by his students in *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*:

> The best advice we can give you about the lines you will be speaking is to learn them *by rote* so that you don't have to concentrate on them while you are playing. We've found drilling the lines while jogging or exercising to be effective because it relieves some of the tedium.
>
> Memorize the lines without inflection and you will avoid the habit of *line readings* -- that is, of repeating lines in the same predetermined manner regardless of what is going on in the scene. (Bruder 57)

These instructions sound similar to those of Michnewicz.

A student, new to the program and used to the Italian repertoire, used repetition and drill as well as his newly acquired acting skills in confronting an aria from Britten's *Billy Budd* . He found the musical entries difficult after a four or five bar vocal break at the end of which no note in the orchestral accompaniment helped him find his first pitch. His solution to the problem was repetition. He worked on the piece an hour a day until the entries became automatic. He was at first sceptical of abandoning attention to musical technique in performance to concentrate on acting but changed his mind: "When I'm not thinking of the text, rhythm, technique and blocking, I'm free to go with the moment." To his surprise he discovered that he was singing better when he put his attention on the acting: "I used to worry about where my "A" was going to come from. Now I don't think about it and it's there" (Interview, 10 Nov. 1993). He admitted that as part of the process he was learning something about humility and trust as he worked to modify his acting which he said was formerly broad and operatic in the worst sense. But before he was able to abandon himself to the acting, he drilled the entries of the aria.

The singer's body receives considerable attention in this program. Grace Ann Adams, movement instructor for the studio, is puzzled by the mentality of many singers: "Some think they can exist in spite of their bodies." She added that her aim was to "break them of the notion of working only as a breath machine." Although she is not trying to make dancers of them, she does want to get the whole body involved with characterization. Adams joked that to achieve this goal, the singers of the opera studio attend more dance classes than dance majors do. The first semester in dance is devoted to helping the students get to know their bodies. Adams finds aerobics helpful for this. By the third semester they learn dances done in opera; these include ballroom dances such as the two-step, tango and polka as well as the waltz. In the fourth semester students integrate skills learned in dance classes and choreograph dances themselves. Students study fencing and physical fighting three hours a week in their second semester.[5]

The physical work serves several functions for the students. The freer body permits the students more fluid movement and prevents tensions that might extend to the voice. The whole physical person contributes to the characterization; the voice is not the only expressive instrument the singer controls. Improvised movement to music gives the students another tool for making discoveries in the score. Instruction in specific dances and combat techniques prepares students for the physical demands of certain roles.

THE PROGRAM IN PRACTICE

The fact that the instructors at the opera studio work with a common goal to train a singing **actor** was obvious to the first-year class. When Major asked the class for their impressions of their last three months in the course, several commented that each teacher built on skills the others taught. One could observe this when watching a dance class where the instructor encouraged them to find the character's physicality in the music. The acting teacher called upon the students to make discoveries about the character through the body. The opera class had them finding character clues in the accompaniment. There was general staff agreement on the most efficient ways to help the students advance. The staff consensus reassured the students that their development was the top priority of the studio.

Reaching an understanding of the character through textual analysis is not a dry, intellectual exercise for the students at the University of Maryland. Socratic dialogue involves the whole class, as well as the teacher, in observing and responding to fellow students' enactments of the text and score. During their first semester students learn the studio's methodology in two scene study classes, one in contemporary theatre and one in opera from the English-language repertoire.

Michnewicz, who conducts the straight acting class, has the students learn Stanislavski's terms of given circumstances, units, objectives, obstacles, and transitions to establish a common working vocabulary. Students prepare their roles then bring the scene to class. To keep the process from becoming too intellectual, the instructor encourages them to be inventive. Since this is a class, there is the luxury of time to indulge in playfulness, something a rehearsal schedule pointing towards a production deadline might not allow. A class scene (9 Nov. 1993) between two characters in *The Wool Gatherer* involved no blocking directives or specific instructions regarding the product the instructor envisioned. Instead Michnewicz encouraged:

> Keep the connection of thoughts. Insert things with your body and make adjustments.... How does it feel? Do you want to pursue it?

The thoughts and objectives arose from the students while the instructor monitored:

> Instructor: What's your objective for standing up?
> First Student: To calm her down. It's not that serious.
> Second Student: It's that serious to her.

Classmates, too, were free to ask for clarification: "What does 'Here we go again' mean?" The students responded to the challenge by answering the questions through their actions and not by an intellectual rationalization. Those watching were actively involved in helping the actors to a better performance. Students asked the man: "Are you a bird killer?" Of the woman they asked, "Are you attracted to him?" The questions raised the stakes by introducing new obstacles. Each actor sorted out questions, listened and observed carefully what the other character was giving and adjusted the performance. After initial individual work at home, the actors worked together in class in an atmosphere conducive to taking risks. They discovered the content of the scene between them by responding to each other's actions. By asking questions of the actors, the other members of the class also contributed to the learning process. This class situation encouraged the sense of ensemble and, at the same time, had students exercising their critical sense by learning to discriminate between what was and was not working.

The Socratic approach of asking questions rather than giving answers leads the students to a unique personal understanding of their objectives. This Socratic technique is at the heart of Major's methodology. In his opera scene study class (11 Nov. 1993), the same first year students helped a class member refine his work on Blitch's aria from Floyd's *Susannah*. The student stated that his main problem seemed to be in making his objective of asking God for forgiveness last for the whole aria. The class proceeded to help him give his imagination a workout. In sorting out whether this was a selfish or selfless aria students questioned him:

> Question: Why do you want forgiveness?
> Reply: He raped a virgin.
> Question: Would he have made a prayer if she hadn't been a virgin? The town thought she slept around. Does he think it's okay for a minister to sleep with a hooker?
> Reply: He doesn't want to go to Hell. It has nothing to do with the woman.

The questions moved from circumstances preceding the aria to the immediate scene.

Major suggested the student study the chords in the prelude which vacillate up and down a step for eight measures. Since there is no specific direction to the music, the singer concluded there are no signs of forgiveness there. At this realization, the student found the character terrified, struck with fear. His objective became "to get salvation." Since God was not responding to his silent prayer, he had to speak aloud. When asked whether he was taking a risk of being overheard, the student responded, "When the stakes are high we risk all." For the first time in the class the student playing Blitch spoke of the character in the first person;[6] the rest of the class followed his lead and addressed him as the character:

> Question: What's your attitude to God?
> Answer: Disappointed.
> Major: Then show us.

When the student began looking for a sign, Major insisted he focus and look: "Don't go into some singer's nirvana. If you're looking, look." The performance became convincing until suddenly some purposeless hand movements crept in. At that point, Major explained, the student had lost his thought process and started conducting himself to the music. To help the student capture the intensity during the prelude, Major suggested he pray and verbalize his thoughts during the opening measures. The exercise worked. His silent script led him right into the cry, "Hear me, o Lord." When a student asked what he was sorry about in that silent script, the answer came, "Thou hast *gone* from *me*." To keep the student exploring the scene, Major questioned whether this was the discovery the character makes in the aria.

With the teacher and class acting as catalyst and refiners, the student moved towards a discovery of the character's actions and became more energized as his imagination and intellect sorted through motivations and objectives. The questions from the class moved from concern for how the character is feeling -- disappointed, frustrated -- towards questions regarding specific actions: "Is he *asking* God for an answer or *demanding* one from Him?" When asked why there was so much discussion about how the character feels, Major explained outside of class that he eased them into speaking of actions:

> What singers are used to hearing from coaches is "Feel this." "Sing loud." "Be angry." By the end of the first semester they learn what is actable. Feelings are not actable. When singers start thinking, it's amazing what they can do. (Interview, 12 Nov. 1993)

The singer-actor who practices Balk's arbitrary attitudes and vocal flexes avoids vocal and emotional ruts and discovers various possibilities for playing a scene. They can, then, respond more readily to the director's and conductor's interpretation of the opera. Major trains his performers in an ensemble situation to discover and play the action of the scene and evolve their own interpretation with the company. Balk urges flexibility; Major urges ensemble.

Through a methodology designed to ask pertinent questions that provoke thought and action, members of the class learn quickly the process of building a character and reinforce the technique through practice. The opera scene study class in the first semester consists of arias form the English repertoire so that neither the singer nor others in the class have to contend with a language barrier. In subsequent semesters they move to duets, ensembles, and scenes in foreign languages. Second-year acting classes move into Shakespeare studies where the emotions are larger and the thought segments longer. Ideally, by the fifth semester the students have a method of approaching character whereby they can independently prepare a full role in an opera and come to rehearsal ready to explore the work with the ensemble.

The ensemble work was evident in the performances. The intensity of the relationship between Miles and the Governess was matched by Mrs. Grose's concern for Flora in *The Turn of The Screw*. Flora, in this production, was a child neglected by a Governess who directed most of her attention toward Miles. Flora found a friend in Mrs. Grose, who played at "cat's cradle" with her. As the Governess sank more deeply into her delusions, Mrs. Grose became the refuge of Miles as well. During dress rehearsal Major helped the singer playing Miles convey that bond to the audience:

> In that last scene never lose contact with Mrs. Grose. Let your eyes try to find her at all times. Be aware of where she is.

The cast of *Figaro* had the opportunity to adjust their performances to accommodate several combinations of actors. Through the four performances, the Count and Cherubino remained constant among the main characters. Two sopranos alternated as Susanna, while Figaro and the Countess were played by graduating students in three performances and second-year students in one. Two students played both Basilio and Don Curzio, alternating roles every other performance. Three dress rehearsals with orchestra ensured that the various cast members and two different string sections had at least one full run. The dynamics shifted as the casts interchanged even though blocking and the shaping of ensemble sections remained constant. All casts contributed uniquely to the interpretation by responding with spontaneity to the personalization of the various cast combinations.

Only one member of the graduating class seemed to be operating outside the ensemble. The student's overt glances toward the conductor for entries signalled to the audience a singer playing a role. Her voice blended well with her partner in duet; she did not, however, seem to be listening to the other character. "She's not," Major admitted; "she's counting." The faculty tried to select candidates who would benefit from their approach, "but," he admitted, "sometimes we make mistakes. She doesn't seem to want to adjust" (Interview, 9 Nov. 1993). He added that although most students functioned well in the group, the program was not devoid of divas. The staff could only do so much to raise a student's performance levels; the rest depended on the individual's talent, proficiency and personality.

The work in Virginia Freeman's movement class drew on the students' imaginative and intuitive senses as well as their physical resources. While one exercise had students zigging and zagging about the room changing direction and speed, another had them working tongue twisters, foot rhythms, and gestures simultaneously. This exercise also showed how the performer could feel the inner pulse of the music to sustain gestures. Starting with a line of the tongue twister the class members took one step and made one gesture that extended over the entire phrase. The phrase was then subdivided into two beats, then four, then eight. When the students returned to doing the phrase in one gesture, the residual energy from the eight-beat phrase sustained the gesture and gave it life for the duration of the line. This work carried over into gestures the individuals improvised to one of Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* marches. As the instructor checked for tension, she encouraged them to give the gesture inner energy: "Cheerlead it. Cartoon it so that it tingles out to the end of your fingers." The fandango the company executed during the betrothal ceremony in *Figaro* illustrated the ease with which the singer-actors slipped into dance. The dance, rooted in their characterizations, carried the action forward. The choreography moved Susanna close to the Count, who received the pinned note from her with the aplomb of a diplomat used to conducting discreet assignations in public. In the background, Cherubino romanced his latest target, Barbarina, in dance.

The performers moved in their costumes with a sense of naturalness. Although there was no attempt at recreating eighteenth-century stylization in the production, the actors moved with the fluidity of those conscious of their social position and comfortable with the deportment and dance lessons trained into them since their youth.

Major wants the performers to move well on stage, but his productions are not choreographed with a lot of movement. He values stillness on stage. He told his scene study class, "Movement is useful, but if everything has gesture, what's meaningful?" (11 Nov. 1993). In their production of *The Turn of the Screw* long passages with no movement were effective. In this production the ghosts, interpreted as products of the Governess' mind, appeared in small spotlights behind a black scrim. In the absence of large stage movement gestures became very important. A gesture that was particularly notable was that of the Governess offering her hand for her new employer to kiss. This established the suggestion of the beginning of a romantic fantasy on the part of the Governess. This gesture she repeated twice into the air during the course of the opera before offering her hand to Miles near the end of the piece. Thus, she transferred her growing obsession from the absent master to the young boy in a particularly chilling moment. The fact that a graduating soprano played the role of Miles produced a complex audience response. The audience could relax in that this seduction scene did not involve a boy soprano, yet at the same time, Miles had the maturity to understand the implication of the gesture and to respond to it. This reinforced the audience's contempt for the Governess, whose dementia was turning her into a paedophile. Miles escaped and left the Governess bemoaning the evil that had emerged from within her.[7] The gesture and the Governess' constant wiping away of perspiration from forehead and neck signalled to the audience the extreme emotional tension the character was experiencing.

For both operas Major preserved the convention of the fourth wall and had the characters contain their story within that wall. The arias sung by the characters when alone on stage were internal pieces not bravura turns for the singers. Most of the singers handled the approach successfully. The Count, in *Figaro*, pondered his situation within the stage picture and allowed the audience to eavesdrop on his predicament. Cherubino held a strong focus during the first aria "Non so più" so that the audience together with Susanna and the Countess caught the youth's palpitations for every woman with whom he came in contact. One of the students singing Figaro had difficulty containing his performance within the set. During the first orchestra rehearsal he seemed to be staring at the floor during "Se vuol ballare." Major explained that he was trying to break the habit of delivering the piece to the audience. By opening night he succeeded in lifting his head and focusing on the imaginary Count he addressed in the aria.

During dress rehearsals, Major spoke quietly and reassuringly that everything would be fine. Although the first run of *The Turn of the Screw* with orchestra was very much a stop and start affair, a spirit of co-operation prevailed.

When the student playing Mrs. Grose had difficulty catching the conductor's baton as she handled a scrap book and tried to negotiate an upstage turn, she began to show signs of disappointment in herself. The conductor, Robert McCoy, called to her that she was doing fine. Major was beside the conductor immediately to confer with the student and conductor. The conductor could stretch the bar a little to give her a little more time on the entry. By the third and final dress rehearsal all problems were smoothed out. The opera opened with the cast, orchestra and stage crew relaxed and ready to share their work with the audience. This typified Maryland Opera Studio's committed ensemble approach to acting in opera.

CONCLUSION

When asked whether he followed a particular acting text, Major replied that he had just finished writing the first draft of a book based on his own teaching experience with opera singers. In reference to existing acting texts he commented that *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*[8] is a "wonderful little book."

As a teacher, Major relies heavily on the Socratic method placing emphasis on the students' responses and personal discoveries to help them develop their entire creative potential. In preparing a role, the intellect only takes the student so far. It is a door opener. Imagination and instinct are invited to work with the intellect in discovering the character. Repetition and habit, paradoxically, encourage spontaneity. So that the body might participate in the exploratory process too, movement classes draw on intuition and imagination.

In performance the students exhibited a free voice and a physical presence of relaxed restraint. During the opera scene study class (11 Nov. 1993), the students admitted that one of the hardest things to learn is that stillness is good. When Major commented that "movement is a substitute for thought," a class member added, "It's really interesting to see an actor thinking and not wandering."

Major directed the students of that class away from talking about the character's feelings to talking about what the character wants:

> Do it happy. What does that mean? Ask yourself "What does he want?" The best expenditure of emotion is on "What do I want and how do I get it?" (Opera scene study class, 11 Nov. 1993)

The instructions which direct the student away from trying to play emotion are similar Mamet's views on this subject:

> Again, the actor must use his common sense to identify what is and is not within his control. Your feelings are not within your control, so it is not within the bounds of common sense to say "I must feel this certain way" for any particular moment of the scene. Instead, you must be able to say, "This is what I am *doing* in the scene, and I will do it irrespective of how it makes me feel. (Bruder 6)

In *Writing in Restaurants* Mamet interprets the purpose of Stanislavski's jargon as it assists the actor in playing the action of a scene:

> The notions of objective, activity, moment, beat, and so on are all devoted toward reducing the scene to a specific action which is true to the author's intention, and physically capable of being performed. The purpose of these concepts is to incite the actor to act. They all prod the actor to answer the one question which is capable of freeing him from self-consciousness and permitting him or her to become an artist: "What am I doing?" (132-133)

Although Major and Mamet draw on elements of Stanislavski's teachings such as the playing of an objective, for them the way to live truthfully in the moment does not require emotional validation as it does for Stanislavski. Major's system acknowledges that a singer-actor might feel emotion in response to playing an action or in response to another character's action. Major, as does Mamet, thinks it is a waste of time to try to conjure emotion. A more profitable approach to successful acting is through determining the score of actions to be played and following that score in performance.

The stress on ensemble takes the student's concentration outside the self and places it on the other in situations that lead to trust and to sharing in the creative process. The supportive atmosphere of the opera studio is conducive to exploring instincts. The judgmental, autocratic teaching that Balk denounces also has no place in this program. The Maryland Opera Studio prepares an independent singer-actor who can respond to any type of directorial command and any type of opera (excluding the baroque period). The practical approach combines theory and practice and leads to a thorough integration of the physical and vocal, freeing the singer-actor to respond organically.

The students at the studio indicated their confidence that they were receiving a thorough preparation. Would they move on to operatic careers? In an interview (10 Nov. 1993), Cossa said all he could do was "chip away tension that is not necessary for the sound until the free voice emerges. Will it have major operatic quality? Who knows?" When it comes to having a career, Major agrees with Cossa: "That depends on the voice" (Interview, 13 Nov. 1993). Major added, "My job is preparing them so they'll know what to do if they do have a career."

NOTES

[1] Research for this chapter consists primarily of personal interviews with the staff and students of the Maryland Opera Studio at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD. I also observed first-year classes, private coaching sessions, and rehearsals and performances of senior students at that institute during the week of November 7-13, 1993. I have chosen not to identify individual students of the school by name.

[2] The department outlines its program and rationale in a thirty-five page booklet entitled *Opera at the University of Maryland: A Proposal for the creation of a Department of Music Opera Center containing a Comprehensive Training Program.*

[3] Michnewicz, whose teaching qualifications include an MFA from Yale University in theatre, knows the problems a singer faces first hand from his nine years performing in opera.

[4] The text Major mentioned in connection with improvisation is Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theatre* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1963). (Telephone interview, 7 Sept. 1993).

[5] Jim Sheerin was not at the University of Maryland in November. However, I observed his hand-to-hand combat classes and his fencing sessions between Don Giovanni and the Commendatore at the Banff Centre during July 1993. In very structured sessions he led the students to see that it took both of the participants in the fight to sell it to the audience. The victim's energy had to equal that of the aggressor. The two formed an instant ensemble. For the sword fight, which lasted a matter of seconds in the opera, he worked daily for a week and a half on basic moves he would use in the choreography. All was done slowly and with control until the moves became automatic. Then he worked the choreography slowly knowing that the actors would not have to be at speed until the technical rehearsal. He stressed going slowly, making no mistakes and taking no chances. The actors would work the routine into muscle memory. When asked about the role of emotion in the acting process he replied, "There's nothing more frightening than being opposite an actor with a sword in his hand when he's in an emotional frenzy" (8 July 1993).

[6] It is interesting to note singers speaking objectively about the characters they are portraying. There is also a tendency to objectify the voice and to refer to it as some entity distinct from themselves.

[7] The interpretation drew mixed reactions. One audience member who had taught the original Henry James novella on which the opera is based was amazed that this interpretation could be realized on the stage. Another person at the same performance (12 Nov. 1993) accused the director of manipulating the text; he proclaimed, "The director reigns supreme." Major countered with a statement that he had not changed a thing.

Major did not change the music or the text. He did, however, ignore stage directions which had Miles, not the Governess, stealing the letter. The directions also had Miles collapsing after proclaiming his connection with Quint. To make the scene between Quint and Miss Jessel (a scene which does not appear in James' piece) work as a projection of the Governess' mind, Major had the Governess seated at her desk off to the side during the scene. Although it is not uncommon for theatre directors to ignore stage directions that are not part of the dialogue of a script, some audience members familiar with the opera were concerned about the change that shifted the focus of the libretto. While the novella allows for ambiguity concerning the ghosts, Myfanwy Piper's libretto shows them existing apart for the Governess' imagination. Major's production sought to show the other possibility James' piece suggests. The change did allow the young soprano playing the Governess scope for a powerful interpretation.

[8] Melissa Bruder et al, (New York: Vintage, 1986). This is the text that Joshua Major, Leon Major's son, uses with the opera workshop he teaches at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. (Telephone interview, 1 Sept 1993).

CHAPTER 3

"AN EXPERIENCED PERFORMER COPES"

ROBERT DESIMONE AND THE OPERA PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN[1]

While working toward undergraduate and graduate degrees in music, voice students at the University of Texas at Austin may select opera electives and gain performing experience under the guidance of opera professionals in the five fully staged productions the department presents yearly. In contrast with the University of Maryland where the final semester's performance is the culmination of two and a half years of intensive class work, the program at the University of Texas gives much of its training through the rehearsal and performance process itself. Robert DeSimone, who heads the Texas program, stated that students in the productions have an advantage over others who only take the opera workshop classes:

> I can see a major difference between a student who is in an operatic performance at the end of the semester and the student who is not. The one who is in class is not at the same point. I used to think it was the day in and day out of performing; then I realized they

> were getting a lot more. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

DeSimone leads all his singer-actors, who are at varying stages of preparedness in their acting, through the rehearsal process. The relationship of actor to director is very much that of apprentice to master, and DeSimone, himself, learned his craft through the apprentice system.

DeSimone is in his eleventh year with the University of Texas at Austin where he has served as Director of Opera since 1984. Assisted by a teaching, coaching and design staff comprised of music and theatre professionals, DeSimone is able to give his opera majors a taste of the profession. The university's productions, he claims, support the students with costumes and sets often superior to those available in professional opera (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994).

Whereas Balk and Major entered opera from a theatre perspective, DeSimone comes to opera from a music background. Having begun his career as a pianist, he eventually completed formal music studies (after his European apprenticeship in opera) with a doctorate in opera performance from the University of Washington in Seattle. He explained that a desire to work collaboratively with other musicians turned him from the solitude of the piano to the more gregarious world of opera. His first mentor was opera director, Herbert Graf, under whom he apprenticed in Geneva. After learning his craft in the field, he directed operas in Zurich, Rome and in various opera houses in Germany. His acting approach is based on that of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, an approach he acquired during a four-year period in London as protégé of Noah Quarrie of Saddlers Wells.

DeSimone is, then, a musician with a strong theatre background (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994).

He brings considerable directing experience to the program in Texas. In North America DeSimone has served as resident director for Seattle Opera. He has staged works at the Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center, Los Angeles Music Center and for numerous regional companies. During the summers, he has been active at Des Moines Metro, Arkansas' Inspiration Point and in Aspen when not in Europe or staging summer premieres of musical theatre works (Telephone interview, 14 Sept. 1994). During the December-January break in the 1993-1994 school year, he staged *The Aspern Papers* for the Illinois Opera Theater at the Krannert Center with singers on the verge of professional careers.

AIMS OF THE PROGRAM

The music department of the University of Texas at Austin is a large school of over one hundred voice majors. Of that number approximately twenty-five are opera majors with the term opera major encompassing both undergraduate and graduate students. The school also offers degrees in opera directing at the master and doctoral levels. The main thrust of the department is to provide good musical preparation for well-rounded musicians. DeSimone's role in that preparation is to give them experience in performing, and it is his philosophy that "an experienced person copes" (Telephone interview, 14 Sept. 1994). In five major productions a year the students gain first-hand experience in a season that might include Mozart's

Così fan tutti, Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman*, Britten's *Turn of the Screw*, and Bernstein's *West Side Story*. DeSimone includes Broadway musicals, despite the resistance of some opera students, to expand the singers' versatility.

A student in a master's program, if deemed vocally ready, could have eight to ten public performances in opera (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994). One doctoral candidate, who is a voice major and not an opera major, was able to perform five roles during her time with the department. She hopes to teach and is delighted to have gained performing experience which she can bring to her teaching:

> What I like here is the personal attention. I didn't get lost in a crowd as I might have among bigger voices at an institute such as Indiana. (Interview, 23 Feb. 1994)

The opportunity to perform is something coach Terry Lusk, who came to Austin in 1985 after seventeen years with the San Francisco Opera, thinks fills a need. He stated that although some graduates of the program managed to support themselves singing in regional opera and in Germany, there was a disparity in numbers of those studying and those who actually have a career. This is true of many who aspire to a career in the arts. When asked why he thought so many persisted in struggling against such odds, he acknowledged the inner drive of the potential artist: "They feel it's something they just have to do." He spoke of one very fine graduate who went straight into teaching: "She loves it. She gets to do some performing; so it's ideal for her" (Interview, 25 Feb. 1994).

For several students the program lets them discover whether or not a performance career is for them. DeSimone recounted an example of a baritone with splendid potential. His success in *La Bohème* taught him the standard he could expect from himself; however, the intensity of the experience led him to realize that he could not be happy performing at that level on a regular basis. DeSimone believes it is good for students to come to terms with their abilities and drives: "Students will want to go through that process before moving onto the next plateau" (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994). For another student, in his last year of doctoral studies, the performing experience is opening up a new area as he admits to straddling the fence between performing and a teaching career. He is discovering how both worlds complement each other as he takes his performing skills into his voice class or choral conducting and his knowledge of history and theory into his rehearsals. With the intensity of his theoretical courses he realizes that he must say no to all the performing opportunities that arise, yet the program has let him explore lyric theatre and see the relationship between theoretical studies and performance (Interview, 25 Feb. 1994).

Since the university attempts to develop the whole musical individual, those intent on a performance career might build on the foundation they receive in Austin. Additional training with a conservatory or young artist program would let them focus on their speciality. DeSimone learned quickly to modify professional standards with students who spend twenty hours a week in rehearsal on top of a full course load that might include studies in politics and Eastern philosophy as well as music. Such a system that calls for students, who are at varying levels, to receive a grade each semester seems, for him, at odds with the artistic process:

> This art form, in a way, does not belong in a university system....Everyone is working at a different level. Some will need two years for what others can accomplish in three months. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

The system is challenging for the teacher too when an opera class includes a range of abilities and experience from second-year undergraduate to second-year graduate student. Although new students have an opportunity to observe the work of more advanced singers in the opera workshop, DeSimone cannot structure that course to enable students taking it for a second or third year to build on skills in a systematic way. He is constantly restructuring it to avoid duplicating exercises for the returning students while giving the basics to those in their first year of the workshop. The productions include students on stage for the first time in opera with others in their sixth or seventh year at the school. Here again, he must devote attention to the newer students so that the performance is a positive experience for them. What DeSimone knows he can do is help all students improve and rejoice in whatever advances they make.

The one element that DeSimone hopes each student will take away from the program concerns the emotional spectrum of the operatic performer:

> Since I am Latin the emotional spectrum runs high for me; therefore, I can say for students leaving this program that they can deal with high emotion on the stage. They're plugged into emotional values. (Interview, 22 Feb.)

He deplores the fact that we are living in a world that has become devoid of emotion. With young people he maintains, "It's all kind of grey." The effect is too cool for him:

> I praise the person who has a high, almost volatile, emotional spectrum because you know where you sit with that individual. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

For him opera must operate at a level of high intensity:

> I am still a great believer of Mozart at his best when he is very emotional for an eighteenth-century composer and Strauss and Puccini at their emotional best. I think that is still valid. And I think that's what people want to see on the stage. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

He believes that every singer should aspire to emotional intensity and felt earlier in his career that it was his duty to draw it out of the performer. Now he believes the intensity will come in the performer's own time. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

For him most approaches to acting from the spoken theatre are rather tepid for opera. As an exception to this he cited Stella Adler's work and spoke highly of the emotional level he had seen in videos of her classes. He pointed to a copy of her text, *The Technique of Acting*, on his desk (Interview, 25 Feb. 1994). DeSimone makes a distinction in the lyric and spoken theatre:

> A lot of acting teachers will say, "Acting is acting. It doesn't matter where you're doing it or what your medium is." That is not true. The singing actor takes a cue first and foremost from the music or a combination of the music and text....I'm a musician first with a strong theatre background. I'm not coming from the words first but from the music first. I don't see how, with something as enormously dynamic as the music in an opera, you cannot focus on it first. I mean, the music dictates most of the emotion whether it's Mozart or Puccini. Finding that tells me where the character is going and how that character is going to move on stage. (Interview, 22

Feb. 1994)

He recalled his disappointment in a production staged by a theatre director who interpreted the opera primarily from the text. The opera seemed somewhat flat to him.

As a musician, DeSimone emphasizes the impact which music has on the energy level required for acting in opera. His training process places the student in a practical situation of rehearsing for a real performance. Under the guidance of a teacher/director, the young opera apprentice acquires performance skills.

FUNCTION OF THE SINGER AS ACTOR

For DeSimone, the singer as actor leads the audience through the emotional experience of the opera:

> The role of the singer on the stage is to take the audience somewhere. Emotion, which clarifies meaning, helps us take that journey. If I become effective in my performing and project that emotion to the audience, we will become one unit, and you, as audience, will go anywhere I take you no matter what the path. Be it the most elevated or the most depraved, you will go with me, and at the end of the evening you'll say, "I spent my money well at that performance." (Interview 22 Feb. 1994)

A performer who embodies this principle for him is Renata Scotto, who drew enormous audiences up to the end of her career:

> She didn't withhold anything from her audience. She let you know every single emotion clearly and took you on an incredible journey....I think every performer should aspire to that. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

To help the students reach that level in performance, DeSimone prefers to score his singer-actors in rehearsal as the composer has scored the text. He blocks the scene to include the characters' intentions and physical movements. When the students have mastered the blocking and grasped the characters' intentions, DeSimone allows them to make sense of what they are doing and fill the roles with their personalities:

> I never let a person flounder or say, "Get up and do something and let me see how it works."
>
> I had a couple of students come out of program in the East [New England Conservatory] where they were used to being directed in a different manner. They evidently knew the music, got up and addressed something. The director would say, "Yes, that's nice. Take that and use it. And now take it and go some place with it. Try this sitting in a chair."
>
> That's not me. "You're going to sit in the chair because of a certain emotion. You just learned you didn't win the competition; so you collapse in the chair." (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

DeSimone is not a "traffic cop" who moves students around the stage by some inscrutable plan or personal concept. He expects the students to understand the circumstances of the scene, but he provides an explanation of a character's motivations from his analysis of the score to help students understand why they are blocked as they are in the scene. For the more experienced, DeSimone allows some freedom: "I can actually let them go in a way and develop a little something for themselves" (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994).

He seems to employ this approach from his European training under the apprentice system. Many singers are used to working this way on vocal literature;

they are true to the composer and the poet before fitting themselves into the performance. Meeting the technical and musical demands of classical singing requires students to rely heavily on voice teachers and language coaches before abandoning themselves to their personal responses to the work. First they have to master what is on the page so that they can present the composer's work without harming their vocal chords. The libretto, which is often in a foreign language, is not immediately accessible. Singers must be able to translate the language and master the pronunciation. When Stanislavski wanted his opera singers to work for expression while studying the music, his singers in Moscow had the advantage of working primarily on Russian repertoire. DeSimone schedules rehearsals so that the last ten days before opening night are designed to allow the performers to become comfortable with the directions he has given. It is during this period that the singers make the roles their own and imbue them with their own personalities (Telephone interview, 14 Sept. 1994). How the students do this is not made clear.

DeSimone would like his singers to arrive at rehearsal with the music mastered. An ideal situation would have them begin rehearsals with the score memorized. He also expects them to have a strong understanding of the circumstances of the libretto. One of the more experienced singers described her preparation for a role in the following manner. She learned the notes and the text, worked out the relationships of her character with other characters in the opera, became aware of harmonic changes that might indicate mood changes, and felt herself ready for the director to interpret the role. She was careful not to set anything lest this interfere with her ability to be flexible to the demands of the conductor or the director. She indicated that she came to the first rehearsal with a basic idea of what the opera would be like because of her own musical knowledge and the fact that DeSimone sought to convey the composer's intentions (Interview, 23 Feb. 1994). There was no talk here of the singer-actor working to create a character. DeSimone provided a structure that the students could fill in.

Work on arias in an opera class helped students take clues from dramatic circumstances. In a moment from *The Magic Flute a* particulary robust Tamino practically assaulted his audience vocally with his *fortissimo* rapture over Pamina's picture. His Tamino would have slain a dozen dragons without a second thought. When he was led to recall that moments earlier the character had fainted at the sight of the serpent, he was intellectually ready to accept a more lyrical approach even though his ego would need time to adjust (Class, 24 Feb. 1994).

The work toward ensemble in the *West Side Story* rehearsals conducted by DeSimone touched on characters responding to one another. The emphasis in the early stages was on capturing the energy the music set up to achieve the connection. This was true even in the dialogue sequences. "The dialogue has to have the rhythm that fits the music," DeSimone stated often. Students were encouraged to listen to one another too. During the "Tonight" sequence on the fire escape Tony was instructed, "Listen to Maria's line and pick it up from her"; it was her energy level and rhythm that DeSimone wanted him to respond to.

DeSimone worked so that the energy level of the dialogue matched the intensity of the sung and danced scenes (Rehearsal, 22 Feb. 1994). The choreographer in staging the "America" scene was also intent on keeping the scene moving: "The text has to keep dancing even in the blocked dialogue so there's not a break into dance." And move it did with the pre-song dialogue as tightly blocked as the dancing (Dance rehearsal, 22 Feb. 1994).

At a production meeting (24 Feb. 1994), DeSimone and the choreographer, who also has a musical background, spoke of the difference of their approach from that of actors who usually start rehearsals by talking about their characters and working from the inside out. DeSimone thought for this kind of show especially, the best way to do it was block it and run it. The choreographer agreed that *West Side Story* is not a subtle show: "This isn't Chekhov." Since the music gives the performer so much to go on in lyric theatre, DeSimone believes that the performer has to start from it and not from an inner source. From his experience as a director he has learned that rehearsals progress more successfully when singer-actors plunge into the action of the scene and experience the rhythms it dictates. Discussions on such things as character motivation might intensify a performance during later stages of the rehearsals. DeSimone's philosophy here is not unlike Stanislavski's when the latter moves directly into the scene with his method of physical actions. DeSimone does not find long discussions of character motivation and relationships as helpful as having the students experience the basic actions of the specific scenes. As the rehearsals progress, the students and DeSimone refer to motivations and more complex intentions to "finesse" the scene.

DeSimone's preference for setting externals first had him working for actor-audience contact and for a larger scale of energy in *West Side Story* sooner than some participants from the theatre department were used to. An actor who wanted to respond to her on-stage partner was instructed to give her reaction out to the audience before bringing it to him. She wanted to make contact with her acting partner to establish a relationship within the stage picture. Although she feared that playing this broadly would turn the role into a caricature, DeSimone worried that her naturalistic style would get lost in the grand sweep of the music: "Drama people don't seem to understand that music dominates" (Interview, 25 Feb. 1994). Actors, who build their own score, have more flexibility in determining the relative intensity of dramatic peaks and the length of time needed to reach them. Although musical dynamics and tempi are relative to a degree, the singers must appear to warrant the emotional support of an orchestral accompaniment predetermined by the composer. The opera score is not like a movie soundtrack put in after the actors have done their work. The music students, too, were instructed to bring their lines to the romantic level of the fifties and out of the off-hand nineties. On occasion, the opera students went too far in the other direction; they were cautioned to modify their operatic singing to bring it within the style of musical theatre. Maria could not appear as the confident *diva*: "It's too operatic." DeSimone called for a technical adjustment: "Go for more *sotto voce* and channel the audience in" (Rehearsal, 25 Feb. 1994).

To accommodate the style and size of a work, the facilities at the university offer a variety of performance spaces. The four-hundred-seat McCullough Theatre was an appropriate venue for the intimate *Turn of the Screw*. For *West Side Story* the group would use a larger auditorium in the theatre department. The Performing Arts Center housed a three-thousand-seat theatre: "It's ridiculous for us, but this is Texas," joked DeSimone (21 Feb. 1994). Singers have an opportunity to try out this last hall during mock auditions to become accustomed to singing in such a large space before they undertake a professional audition tour that might have them auditioning for or on such a stage.

The role of DeSimone's singer-actors is to assimilate the physical score and intentions/objectives given by the director in rehearsal with the circumstances of

NATURE OF THE SINGER AS ACTOR

Coach Terry Lusk spoke of the mental paradox the singer faces in balancing technique and artistry:

> Sometimes you'll ask singers what they're thinking about when they're singing because you wonder why they are so unexpressive. They'll tell you, "I'm thinking so hard to get every note out." And they have to at a certain point. That's what's going to keep them singing. But they let go of those tensions when they think about something else. (Interview, 25 Feb. 1994)

Assuming that the singer is working on material that is within technical reach, members of the department held that the singer's thought process can transform the printed material into an expressive communication. Embodied in that thought process are the intellect which analyzes and understands given circumstances, memory which often provides material for the imagination, and the imagination which enables the performer to enter the circumstances and the character's thoughts. As with Balk's and Major's programs, it is the thought focus of the singer-actor that the audience follows in performance. The more specific it is, the more focused the performer will appear.

For DeSimone work for specifics begins with a word-for-word translation of the text to avoid a general emotional wash of a series of pretty sounds. In class (22 Feb. 1994) an advanced singer presented a poised rendition of Pamina's aria from *The Magic Flute* with beautifully sustained phrases, but DeSimone commented that the whole aria was very sad and seemingly directed to some nebulous place. In conversation after the class he noted that although "Ach, ich fühl's" tends to sit that way not pulling the emotions in too many directions, the singer could make it more specific by determining which phrases are directed internally as she contemplates her state and which externally to the absent Tamino, on whom she calls to witness her tears. More work on German would help too: "Were she more familiar with the German, she could then imbue certain of the text with a little more intensity." Explicit instructions on how to work toward that intensity were not given. It seemed to be assumed that a word-for-word translation of the text would allow the singer to meld with Pamina's specific thoughts of suicide rather than allowing the singer to drift in a state of generic sadness.

In an informal discussion, some of the more experienced performers explained how they worked to bring scenes to life by letting their imagination enter the circumstances of the work. This entry might come from imaging, emotion memory, and using Stanislavski's "Magic If" tactics. One singer spoke of her ability to enter without hesitation the make-believe world of the work. She was able to visualize very easily and spoke of the audience complimenting her on holding their interest during long musical interludes in a recent concert:

> In those instances you have to look at the music and decide what the music is saying....One interlude in "Knoxville, Summer of 1915" by Samuel Barber goes on and on. What it's setting up is the noises of the town. It comes from a dreamy talking about people sitting on the back porch. Then all of a sudden there are all the noises of the town. In my mind I'm seeing carriages; I'm seeing people going into stores, people talking. I try to make it interesting by changing my focus. People were interested. They knew something was going on. They may not know that I'm seeing a carriage go by. (25 Feb. 1994)

In the opera class (24 Feb. 1994) DeSimone asked a mezzo-soprano to explain for the class her process of entering Mignon's world in "Connais-tu le pays." She had the piece under control vocally and intellectually and was on the verge of entering the character's world. To DeSimone's question, "How do you react to a story so remote from your experience?" the singer responded that it was not really so remote:

> I take what I know -- missing my home -- and the lovely pastoral description. I've been to Walden Pond. I can take that sense of memory and take the essence of some emotional relationship and relate it to that character.

Her imaginative interpretation of the prelude had Mignon hearing the snatch of a folk song she had not heard since she was taken from her home. She was able to work from that image of happiness in the first verse and think that she might be able to return home. She was instructed to try to get to the happiest point in her reminiscence and *segue* into the text. The class followed her sense of longing and felt that she was really seeing what she described in that verse. In the second verse, set to the same music, she became more despondent realizing she probably would not get there, but that verse was not so clear for the audience. DeSimone suggested she stay with the picture of the second scene until she sorted out where she was in relation to the birds she was describing:

> Do you want us to be vague? Be specific; then we as the audience will be on the edge of our seats going with you.

The student worked the piece using imaging and emotion memory.

DeSimone asked her to become aware of gestures that were starting to emerge of their own accord and to make sure that she did not draw the audience's attention away from her face by letting her hands stray below her waist. These she could use more deliberately once she focused her internal picture. To help her share the communication yet remain within the stage picture, he placed another actor in the scene with her. To help her establish the character's emotional level on the repeated phrase, "C'est là que je voudrais vivre," DeSimone suggested she work for some subtext: "What else is she saying? We need to know what her subtext is to see her enthusiasm."

Several singers spoke of keeping an inner monologue going to keep them focused on the character rather than on vocal technique or what was happening in the auditorium. Directing student Noel Koran explained in an interview (24 Feb. 1994) how he had his performers make use of this inner monologue in *The Turn of the Screw*. With the director, the singers analyzed the libretto and score to arrive at a satisfactory inner script for a more organic performance:

> The outer monologue, the sung dialogue, comes from the inner monologue. Then there is a seamless through-line....Then I get them to ask themselves, "How would I react as a real person on the stage in that situation?....How does the thought process translate into action?"

Koran explained that working with objectives and obstacles were an innate part his rehearsal process through his training at the American Conservatory Theatre. But he did not find that scoring a role with objectives and taking those onto the stage was so useful for the singers considering their stage of development and knowledge of theatre practice. For one thing students unfamiliar with the terminology were confused: "I don't use that language in rehearsal," he said. "I find I'm eternally going through a translation process." He found helping students set small-scale objectives that would give them a reason for entering the scene helped them make a transition from singer in the wings to character in the drama. He acknowledged the basic level of the students as actors:

> I find it helpful to have them ask, "Why am I here at this point in time?" I find students have a tendency to wander on stage and find themselves there. Once they get on stage they start "acting." If they take a moment to figure out why they are coming on stage, as mundane as that may be, they have a reason for being there. For example, for the "Welcome Scene" I gave Mrs. Grose her mini-objective, to come into this space one last time to check that everything was in

> order for the new governess' arrival. She came on stage in the circumstances.

From that point the inner monologue could take over.

It is this inner monologue that Koran relied on to keep the performance fresh and spontaneous:

> If you have a coherent mental process that's similar every night and are working with other individuals who are also thinking along similar, relatively structured lines, the work will be basically the same every night. But as all of you are thinking slightly different things each night, there will be different permutations in each performance....For me it's very interesting. It's the same show but slightly different each night. It doesn't make for a very slick show, but I think it's good for this kind of opera....The more they do it, the more it changes and evolves....Once they get their feet wet with the orchestra, once they're feeling comfortable, the emotional level comes back. The opera then really takes off. It takes on a life of its own. The process is exciting for me as a director. They come up with wonderful things, and I'll wonder why I didn't come up that myself.

In speaking of his own performing experience Koran pointed out the paradox of the freedom that the lyric theatre's constraints can offer a performer:

> In straight theatrical pieces you don't have the limitations of actually having to reach an emotional point or level by such and such a beat....[On the other hand] when you have no boundaries, that can be somewhat debilitating because you don't know where to go or when to start or stop the journey. Music sets the limits. You just accept that, go there and fill in all the rest....I enjoy the challenge of making it work within the limitations.

Some of the singers in *West Side Story* wanted to know exactly where those limitations were before working imaginatively on character. Dialogue over music from which a singer-actor has to *segue* into song while ascending and descending a fire escape presented timing problems that the impulse of the moment could probably not solve as effectively as careful planning. This had to become habitual before the actor could feel free to respond to the other character in the scene. Eventually there would be the conductor to think about who might take the scene in two rather than in four beats to the measure. The actor had to be secure in other aspects of the scene to adapt to the pulse the conductor would choose. The director found the spot in the music for Tony and Maria to take hands. During rehearsal (24 Feb. 1994) the decision was made to "kiss her on the B flat." The performers would get used to this physical score and perform it automatically as they were doing with the musical score.[2]

DeSimone prefers to work very technically with the young singers and build the appearance of emotion from the outside. There are two reasons for this. In the first place he does not think that students aged twenty-two had life experiences to draw on that would match the emotional intensity of operatic situations. In the second place, and more importantly, they didn't have the maturity or experience to protect their voices. He spoke of Renata Scotto's emotional intensity but also of her tattered voice at the end of her career and her own admission that she gave too much. He preferred to have the students emulate a performer such as Birgit Nilsson, with whom he worked in *Turandot*: "Here was an enormous outpouring of emotion from an enormous voice. The moment we took a break, none of that emotion existed" (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994).

DeSimone spoke of building ninety per cent of the character technically through the facial mask, stage picture, and stage action. The other ten per cent has to come from the individual singer-actor. He tells his students:

> What is going to convince the audience is the other ten per cent that somehow has to come from you. And you decide yourself how much you invest of that ten per cent. You can say "I'm going to go for the gut wrench and see if my voice is there, or I'm going for four per cent and save myself so that when I sing this B flat, which is newly found in my voice, I'm going to be able to repeat it in the studio the following morning. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

DeSimone continued to explain that because singers tend to overachieve, he selects material from Mozart, Britten and contemporary American opera that is not so emotionally demanding: "I've done *La Bohème* and *Suor Angelica*. Those are probably the extremes of the gamut." Works that are more demanding, DeSimone does with singers who know how to protect their voices (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994).

DeSimone has no fear that the technically prepared performance will be too mechanical. The adrenalin brought on by the orchestra and the audience causes the emotion to be a little more honest: "What I have through a slightly artificial way helped them to find, they bridge for themselves" (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994). It would appear that the student's own response to the performance situation furnishes true emotion for DeSimone. After the performances DeSimone and the students discuss where emotion worked to enhance their performance and where it threatened to interfere. In the opera workshop class some attention was given to emotion memory and imagination to help the students understand the character's world. Focusing on the character's thought process kept students in the circumstances and away from worries of vocal technique. In the rehearsals concentration was on what the character was doing to achieve this goal.

Conveying the role with the whole body and the face is something that DeSimone works for with each student in the opera workshop class. But there is no movement program specifically designed for opera students to help them work on this on a regular basis. During DeSimone's rehearsals of *West Side Story* the blocking was so specific that singer-actors often performed actions to which their bodies responded naturally.

When questioned about gestures, DeSimone said that he used to dwell on them until he decided that gesture is a cultural thing. Some individuals gesture spontaneously more than others. For those who do gesture he directs them to highlight or clarify a segment and makes sure the gesture is shaped with a beginning, middle and end. His main concern is that the student feel comfortable. When a beginner is concerned about hands and what to do with them, DeSimone answers, "There's nothing wrong with them being in repose." He noted that when they have the freedom to take that option they often feel encouraged enough to start experimenting. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

For works that require a more classical carriage he sometimes makes compromises to cut the hours and hours of work necessary to make the opera effective. His recent *Così fan tutti* he chose to dress down to avoid dealing with an eighteenth-century comedy of manners:

> I don't think you can do a period piece with young people and make it a one hundred per cent stylistic piece unless you have six months to shape every gesture and physical line, making sure that the body is tight, tall from the waist up. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

He has mounted productions of operas by Monteverdi and Handel. In these he worked on the stage picture, physical relationships between characters, and the line of the costume.

THE PROGRAM IN PRACTICE

The master/apprentice relationship has teachers leading the way encouraging the students and reinforcing successful efforts. DeSimone believes it is very important for the potential singers to have this professional guidance:

> One thing that I have a hard time with is the teacher who has never had a career trying to guide the student who is career oriented. I don't understand how that works. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

One might argue that teaching, itself, is an art. Having the skills might bring a person success in a performing career. Being able to bring out those skills in another is the teacher's task. Student director Koran spoke of his transition from performer to director. As an actor, he just "did it." To direct he had to understand and communicate the process (Interview, 24 Feb. 1994).

Under the professional guidance of the teacher, coach and director, the students experience the discipline of the opera singer. Voice teacher Darlene Wiley gained her performing experience in the German repertory system. The performing opportunities at the University of Texas, she felt, prepared the singers for "going into the theatre and having someone tell them what to do." For her, that was the way to learn the discipline of opera since North America lacks a system equivalent to the German repertory system. In that system singers begin working in small roles with a company and gradually work their way up to the leading roles in their *Fach*, or voice category.

DeSimone is finding that students today want to co-operate in the learning process as more than recipients of knowledge. His approach of imparting expertise from the top down meets resistance from a generation used to a student-centred educational system. The master/apprentice relationship has its problems for the master today:

> The down side, I find, is that students will often say to me, "You're not giving me any opportunity to develop who I [as the character] am and think about who I am." The answer I want to give, which doesn't come out all that often, is "You're not ready to do this." Instead, I say, "That's going to come down the road a little"....When blocking is reasonably in place and some ideas have been set, I like them to start finding a point of view for themselves. I then add to that. Maybe that's putting the horse behind the cart. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

He is anxious to avoid conflicts that sometimes arise when he is not able to incorporate ideas that students suggest. DeSimone comes into the rehearsal with the scene already formed in his mind. He will make adjustments in blocking if students are uncomfortable, but the students do not contribute to the blocking or to the interpretation of the scene. Their task is to master his reading of the scene.

Rehearsals during the early stages of *West Side Story* were director-centred but run by a director who filled the role of benevolent dictator. Actors were blocked; motives were explained; objectives were given. The only dialogue was for clarification of instructions. With tremendous energy, DeSimone led the cast to understand the intent of the librettist and composer. The atmosphere was supportive as his eyes and ears were alert and ready to compliment a facial expression that caught the essence of a moment or to question a line reading that might impede the rhythm of the scene. Always he applauded their hard work and mastery of the blocking. In the mix of actors and singers, he gave the actors leeway to add some touches to their blocking and took care that the singers had specific instructions and enough repetition to feel secure. He knew the actors would need more help in the music rehearsals:

> There's no doubt that the drama people can address the text with much more flexibility in the initial stage. The music student is waiting much more for me to say how it should go. The reverse is going to be true of the actor relative to the music. The actor will wait for the conductor to say how it goes. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

DeSimone ran the opera workshop as a master class, but in this situation he drew on the students' discoveries to help them interpret their arias.

Formal instruction in acting consists of only two classes. Undergraduates have an acting, scene study class for voice majors with the theatre department. Both graduate and undergraduate opera majors share the same opera workshop involving the study of arias and opera scenes with DeSimone. An MFA acting major, with performance experience in Broadway musicals, taught an acting class for the undergraduate voice majors. She explained the main aim of her course:

> My basic thrust is to give them an understanding of how to rehearse a role. I really try working with connection -- connection with text, connection with action. Many times -- and this is a stereotype -- singers have not had acting training and don't have connection. I mean connecting actor to actor as I'm talking with you now, trying to get a message across, rather than just a state of being. I teach them how to do an actor's score which helps them be as spontaneous as possible; that means the actor always has an objective in mind....I want to put it into the music as well. I think that singing a song is just like doing a monologue. You don't want to just sound pretty; you want to get your message and your feeling across. (Interview, 25 Feb. 1994)

Watching Tony singing to an imaginary Maria in an imaginary balcony while the actor playing Maria was beside him on the floor tying her shoelace produced an ironic resonance with the acting teacher's comment that singers do not have connection. He was projecting himself into the final product when an actor might have made contact with a partner as an essential first step.

The acting teacher used terminology such as beats, objectives, and obstacles with her class. Yet the student director said he had to translate these terms in rehearsal. When a graduate voice student was asked whether he scored his role as an actor did, he admitted to not having a systematic approach, but he wanted to know more about acting so that he could come to terms with roles more quickly:

> I always feel, as far as my roles are concerned, I'm a late bloomer. I just come into them through the

> rehearsal process, and since the rehearsal process is so long I have time to do that. As a professional I'll probably only have two weeks tops to come out there and have the role ready to go with the character established; whereas, here we have three months. (Interview, 25 Feb. 1994)

As a graduate student he did not have an acting course in his program. To him the situation was somewhat absurd: "Isn't it crazy that our degree does not require us to do that?" (Interview, 25 Feb. 1994). Graduate students coming from undergraduate programs in other universities might not have had an acting course, and these same graduate students could be the ones in leading roles in the school's performances! In such a situation a director could not build on skills in acting already acquired. The student must depend more on the director to interpret the role. DeSimone, with his experience as an opera director who grew out of an apprentice system, is used to training singer-actors in the rehearsal process. Thus, the discrepancies in acting skills among the cast presents very little problem for him.

Voice students with some acting training had no advanced courses available to them. One had tried to take a double major at her undergraduate university but eventually had to find acting classes on the side at her expense. A singer who had changed her major from theatre to voice had several years of acting classes but could take only the introductory course for voice majors through the university. That singers needed as much training in acting as in singing was something voice teacher Wiley acknowledged (Conversation, 21 Feb. 1994). Training in acting, from the point of view of the teaching staff, seemed to equate to training through production experience.

In his opera workshops DeSimone used to work very technically on the facial mask teaching students how to build happy and sad faces through disciplined control of the muscles. Through the masks students could convey an impression of the character's feelings to the audience and signal feelings of operatic intensity that might not be within their emotional experience. As these were mechanical representations that the student could summon technically, the singer-actor could remain in a calm state. DeSimone's exercises differ from Balk's arbitrary facial attitudes which, in addition to loosening the face, often summoned energy from within the actor. DeSimone's work helped singer-actors signal a character's emotions rather than stirring their own emotions.

During the 1993-1994 school year, however, DeSimone abandoned the mask work which he described as "methodical, tedious and disciplined" for today's students:

> I would spend twelve hours dealing with the face, the mask, what it's like, the muscles. After three sessions students were saying, "Well, I already know that." Intellectually they did, but they didn't have the inclination to flex it as they do vocal scales until it's second nature. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

He replaced that approach in favour of having students delve into the text in his opera workshop class. The class worked on monologues from plays which he did not identify so that students would have to work with what they found in the speech itself. They would then put the text into what seemed appropriate circumstances for the content of the speech. Opportunities to test the material against varying circumstances stretched their imaginations. As well, the work called for the co-operation of the whole class in the discovery process. DeSimone was pleased with results:

> Everyone functioned extremely well and most really enjoyed the experience. Most of them applauded the fact that they did not have to worry about the music and could look at the text and see what that was all about. Toward the end of the semester we dovetailed this into the aria. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

He could see a transfer of the monologue work into the aria. This work, however, was not coordinated with monologue work in the undergraduate acting class. A dialogue between the instructors of the two classes did not seem to exist as a matter of course. Possibly the music department's suspicions of the actor's inner approach and the failure of some theatre directors to give music enough significance in the interpretation of opera prevented communication. The acting teacher's scoring of specific objectives seemed less inner directed than the singers' adherence to imaging, emotion memory and "think the thought" of the opera workshop class. Possibly the course offered by the theatre department varied in its approach from year to year as new graduate students took over the course. The situation recalls Andrew Foldi's comments quoted in the introduction to this paper that music and theatre departments have problems talking to one another and need to understand each other's point of view.

Some years DeSimone has students present their foreign language arias as monologues:

> My premise was that it doesn't matter the language

> you are singing in, you can still deliver the emotion to the audience. And they did prove themselves quite true, once they got over the initial shock of doing Charlotte's aria as a reading. They began to improve tremendously. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

To help the students become more comfortable with singing in a foreign language DeSimone has tried some interesting tactics. He worked in gibberish with the students improvising situations. In a two-week segment they pretended to be a Russian dance troop and actually choreographed two short "ballets":

> ...and there were some not so dance-like bodies in there. They took it very seriously and felt very, very good. They didn't want the Russian unit to end. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

In the playful atmosphere they were all on an equal footing. None of them spoke Russian. According to the rules set up, even the teacher had to communicate with the students in gibberish. One might speculate that a strong desire to communicate raised the emotional level and led to some physical involvement in the communication. When the group moved to a situation with an Italian base the students were not so successful: "They were all a little afraid of the Italian because I'm Italian." Although the language was still gibberish, the presence of an "expert" was inhibiting. While there are no dance classes specifically designed for the opera students at the University of Texas, opera majors in Austin are required to select a movement course from one of three areas. The theatre department offers an Alexander class which, DeSimone explained, singers find very useful because it helps them release physical tension that interferes with singing. Some students find aerobics helpful because the class puts them in touch with their bodies without aspiring to train them as dancers (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994). Students with real problems in basic rhythm in both singing and in putting one foot in front of the other are advised to take a eurhythmics class offered by the music department. Students wanting actual dance classes could arrange them on their own if they felt that was important. DeSimone did not see this as a necessity:

> There are some students who really don't need it as a basic. They just move naturally and have a good sense of body rhythm in relation to music. (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994)

When some cast members of *West Side Story* congratulated a singer-actor on his dancing he explained his process:

> I like to get away from people so they can't see me. They don't know the hell I have to go through just to make it look half way decent. I do. That is behind the scenes. I want everyone to think it comes naturally and easily to me. But it's not true. I'll get comfortable with it. It's just a matter of doing it. (Interview, 25 February 1994)

Although his natural body rhythm enabled him to do the dance, learning by doing was stressful and slow.

For operas that require skill in hand-to-hand combat, the department brings in an expert. The students do not study combat as a regular part of the program although DeSimone will work on falling correctly so that students can perform scenes that require falls technically and safely.

Part of the physical training consists of work with period costumes. Men learn to extend the line of a cape and present themselves to advantage in tights and stockings. Women learn to work with gloves and distinguish how much slipper shows with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hemlines. Practice in the style of the period is intended to assist the singer-actor to acquire a physical understanding of character.

While the students have individual sessions with voice teachers who work with them on vocal technique, only those in the operas had coaching sessions with Terry Lusk. In an interview (25 Feb. 1994), he explained the delicate balance singing students had to achieve between imitating the master and learning to work on their own. He felt he was making headway in getting them to study their music from the score rather than from a recording. Recordings he called "one of the banes of present day performing." He suggested that apart from preventing singers from having the security of precise rhythms, these recordings contributed to the disappearance of big operatic personalities:

> What happens to your personality? Plus you're going to get out there and try to imitate a singer you've heard and try to stay with a conductor who never heard this recording....If you don't listen to the record but do what is in the score, you're going to do your own thing....I think now people are starting to look for more personality.

In his sessions with the students Lusk helped them with diction and musical phrasing as well as with learning the notes. With work on phrasing he helped them find the character in the music. In terms of phrasing, Lusk finds some singers more instinctual than others. A bright person could learn to follow dynamic markings in the score and reproduce them. While this might not lead them immediately to an inspired performance, Lusk thinks maturity in many cases brings improvement. A more instinctual musician could learn from hearing the phrases played:

> For me, the best way is to play phrases for them doing them in different ways....I really try never to say, "This is how it goes" or "Do it this way" unless there is absolutely no time -- and that happens.

He wished for more time so that the singers could have the luxury of "fooling around and working on phrasing," but acknowledged there was too much in their course load to allow them to have that luxury.

He spoke, too, of the inspirational effect of the master teacher:

> If you inspire them some way they're going to learn best, aren't they? You see it in master classes. We had a terrific class with Marilyn Horne. She had a wealth of information, but there was a big personality there, a famous person. That's inspiring. It was inspiring to me too.

Although DeSimone controls rehearsals with a strong hand, he is flexible in communicating with the performers from singing and acting disciplines. He moved between blocking the singer-actors and drawing upon their life experience and technical skills to explain the characters. His technical approach to capturing a scene's emotional intensity was evident in the February 25 rehearsal of *West Side Story*. In the bridal shop, one of the students playing Maria was instructed to feel the pulse of the scene; the emotional high would not sag if the rhythm kept going. The rhythm of the scene conveyed the emotion; all the actor had to do was adhere to the rhythm. Maria and Tony swirled the dressmaker's dummies into position. After a few flurried attempts that resembled a silent film chase, the actors mastered the sequence of moves and executed them quite naturally. Their lines of dialogue fit into the lines of physical action. The other student cast as Maria received instruction on how to allow Anita to be more dominant in the scene. DeSimone drew on the singer's vocal technique to change her from the pragmatic American to the softer focus of young girl from Puerto Rico. When she let more breath into the tone and spoke with a singer's pure, Italian vowels, she experienced the speech patterns of Maria, whose first language is Spanish, a Latin language as is Italian. To raise the emotional level of Anita, who was played by an acting student, DeSimone called upon the student's own Latin background asking her to think of family interactions when tempers flared. This worked well as Anita's tone became much sharper. He helped her make an inner connection that got an honest response from an actor used to working from the inside out. She put on hold her initial hesitancy of "I don't know if I feel that way yet" to try the scene at the intensity level DeSimone sought.

Although there was no time in the rehearsal schedule of this large-cast musical to allow the actors to find their way through discovery, DeSimone took the time to explain his reading of the character's actions through the scene. Anita was confused about her attitude towards Maria in the scene. Maria had volunteered to close the bridal shop so that she would be there alone as Tony entered. When Anita discovered Tony there, the actor wanted to know, "Do you think she's angry?" The director gave his reading of the situation:

> She's been set up. What you don't like is that Maria's not honest and up front with you, but when

> Maria takes his hand, you see the man she cares for as opposed to his ethnic difference.

He led her to find rapid transitions in Anita's part such as her switch to a physical personality when she contemplated the bubble bath. The actor responded quickly to his suggestions for shaping the role. She was hesitant about the intensity level: "My fear is that I don't want to start at an eight." She had not yet discovered that ten was not the high end of the scale for DeSimone; he wanted her to reach a sixteen by the end of the play.

The minor conflicts DeSimone spoke of regarding the performer's desire for input were evident at that rehearsal and one earlier in the week. A student with less acting training exemplified DeSimone's hesitancy in getting his students to bring their own ideas into the scene. Tony entered the shop with a confidant Texas style greeting on "Buenas noches." He was proud to show his Spanish phrase. DeSimone had another idea in mind which he explained in the following dialogue:

> Director: You're entering the place for the first time. Try to ingratiate yourself with Anita.
> Actor: Why should I be nice when she's turned her back?
> Director: Because you're trying to get her to like you. (Rehearsal, Feb. 25, 1994)

Tempers had become ruffled earlier in the week when the same student did not understand why Maria did not respond immediately to his line, "I love you." Instead, she brushed it out of the way with, "Yes, yes, but go." DeSimone explained the situation in the following way. Maria (played by a student with more acting experience) knew Tony loved her, but her immediate goal was to make him leave before he was discovered. She was able to answer his declaration of love with her delivery of "Good Night."

The problem did not seem to stem from students bringing their own ideas or objectives to the rehearsal as much as it did from the lack of understanding on the part of the some students regarding the dramatic structure of dialogue. It advances as each character blocks (or puts up an obstacle to) the other character. Without labelling them objectives, DeSimone explained the characters' intentions as he shaped the scene for the students. Only in the undergraduate acting class, which the graduate students did not take, was there instruction in scoring a scene with objectives. One character manipulating another character is the essence of drama; however, without practice in responding to that interplay, students could easily fall into the habit of insisting on their ideas by manipulating the other students. The pace of the rehearsal gave no time for students to test ideas through trial and error and reject those not working in favour of a better idea the director might suggest.

DeSimone was scoring the character's actions for the students, who performed the actions but spoke of staying in the moment by following the character's thoughts. The singer also uses visualization and emotion memory to personalize the externally imposed score.

CONCLUSION

Two acting courses help students prepare for performance at the University of Texas at Austin. An undergraduate acting course gives those students a basic understanding of an acting process. Students in the opera workshop try a variety of exercises to awaken their imagination and analytical skills. The exercises help students understand motivation and dramatic circumstances. Through such techniques as sense memory, students learn to make personal connections with their characters.

It is through the rehearsal process, which could involve up to four hours a day for students in major roles, that students acquire most of their acting skills under a director who is adept at working with young singers. Similar in approach to Goldovsky, DeSimone dictates the performer's score of the role then acknowledges the contribution of the singer-actors to personalize the performance. During rehearsal, students experience a director supplying objectives (intentions) and explaining motivation. The students learn to think as the characters do in the circumstances of the scene. They also learn to take cues for their energy level from the music. Rehearsals from *West Side Story* had students achieving an ensemble by responding to the energy level of the music and to that of other performers. The blocking forced them to experience the pace of the scene physically. DeSimone is often surprised when students who have been in several of his productions can anticipate his blocking instructions (Interview, 22 Feb. 1994). They are assimilating his techniques.

If an independent singer-actor emerges from this system, it is through the rehearsal process and performances and the individual's ability to develop a working method through that experience. For such a student, the opportunity to perform gives not only confidence but also a method by which to prepare the next role. For some students who are less adept at learning by example, however, the approach left them questioning their ability to work independently through an acting process that would prepare them to build a character in a short rehearsal situation.

NOTES

[1] Research for this chapter was conducted during a visit to the University of Texas at Austin during the week of February 21-26, 1994. I have chosen not to identify individual voice students in this program.

[2] Brian Macdonald, who comes from a dance background, prefers to work this way with opera casts and set the blocking for Banff's 1993 *Don Giovanni* at the beginning of rehearsals for each scene. Kelly Robinson, who comes to opera from dance and theatre, resorted to this approach with some members of Edmonton Opera's *Turn of the Screw* (spring 1993). At the first rehearsal, he suggested a performer explore a scene to arrive at her own blocking. Although the performer was willing to accept this challenge, it was obvious that such an approach was yielding no results for the performer unaccustomed to working this way.

CHAPTER 4

OPERA TO RAVISH THE SENSES

MARSHALL PYNKOSKI AND TORONTO'S OPERA ATELIER

Operas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries present a challenge for the singer-actor used to veristic opera of a later period. Toronto's Opera Atelier, a young company that embraces the demands of baroque and rococo opera, offers an alternative to emotion-based systems by training its singers to act in pre-romantic opera through a study of rhetorical gesture. Although Opera Atelier is, technically speaking, an opera company and not an opera training centre, the company's mandate to perform early operatic works in a style that is historically informed necessitates the training of its singers in neoclassical acting techniques. It does this during its four-month rehearsal periods. Co-artistic director Marshall Pynkoski looks forward to a time when the budget will allow exploratory workshops outside the rehearsal process (Interview, 28 Dec. 1993).

Critics unanimously applaud the company's attention to detail and its quest for excellence even though some wrestle with the aesthetic and the company's achievement of it. While critic Ronald Hambleton might ponder whether the company's production of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* is "artificial, artifice, or artistry," he recognizes it as entertainment of an unusual variety, "a showpiece of cunning design without the slightest tinge of realism" (14 May 1989). The works themselves make no pretence at realism or recreating life; hence, for Opera Atelier, it is reasonable to avoid an acting technique aimed at depicting "real" human beings on stage.

Co-artistic director Marshall Pynkoski chuckles when people call his work in early opera avant-garde, yet the lack of concern for realism and his attention to stylization moves this antique art form toward avant-garde theatre. Indeed, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a champion of the avant-garde, included the American premiere of Charpentier's *Médée* in May 1994, a work performed by Les Arts Florissants in a 1993-94 season that also presented Philip Glass's *Orphée* and Robert Wilson's staging of Waits' *Black Rider* (*Season Schedule*, 7). The Paris based Les Arts Florissants brought Lully's *Atys* to B.A.M. in 1989. Mark Swed in *Opera News* accounts for that group's success:

> ...[William] Christie, who leads an orchestra of period instruments and works with singers fluent in period practice, insisted upon reproducing the stage conventions of Louis XIV's Versailles. "I hate the twentieth century for wanting to appear more intelligent than previous centuries in this respect," he says....He did not go so far as to incorporate the period's rhetorical gestures or attempt a complete reconstruction of seventeenth-century dance steps, with which it might be considerably harder to

> convince a modern audience.
>
> The combination of historical musical performance practices with an identifiable acting style, however, proved the perfect combination for appealing to late-twentieth-century viewers. (May 1989, 22-23)

Opera Atelier risks audience response to unfamiliar rhetorical gesture and period choreography. The rhetorical gesture pattern Opera Atelier uses is not as perplexing as the unusual gesture employed by director Achim Freyer in his Stuttgart production of Glass's *Akhnaten*[1] nor that of Peter Sellars in his version of Mozart's *Così fan tutti* set in a diner.[2] Whereas contemporary directors often want to take the spectator beyond the literal and conscious level of the text, Opera Atelier uses gesture to bring the text and its literal meaning to the forefront. Copious program notes orient Opera Atelier's audience to the company's practices.

This risk taking is working as co-artistic directors Marshall Pynkoski and Jeannette Zingg are leading the company to national and international acclaim. They have taken their works to Ottawa, Montreal and New York. The Sorbonne in Paris has invited them to perform there. Although funding has not allowed them to bring the company to Europe, the husband-and-wife team of Pynkoski and Zingg have given master classes in Stuttgart and Versailles. Pynkoski explained (Interview, 28 Dec. 1993) that under the auspices of Le Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles he and Zingg, over a period of time, are conducting eight master classes in gesture and dance. Eventually, the company will mount full-length opera-ballets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Ironically, the Canadian team is helping the French relearn their own performing tradition.

Opera Atelier has recently ventured into the media world choreographing, staging and performing in the 1993 NOS/Rhombus Media television production of *The Sorceress*, which featured soprano Dame Kiri Te Kanawa in the title role (and the only singer in the piece) and Jeannette Zingg as her rival, Bradamante. In February 1995 Opera Atelier will present its production of *Dido and Æneas* at the Houston Grand Opera.

Both Pynkoski and Zingg come to opera by way of classical ballet. Ballet, Pynkoski points out, is perhaps the last bastion of eighteenth-century protocol and deportment ("Opera Atelier"). Their desire to stage works informed by original sources led them to separate areas of study in England and Australia. Zingg took a special course at London's Royal Academy of Dance to learn to read period dance notation so that she could make her own decisions on the work ("Opera Atelier"). Pynkoski's study of gesture led him to the work of theatre historian Dene Barnett:

> He told me he didn't take students, but we exchanged videos for some time and finally he agreed to take me provided I would work privately with him for a minimum of six to eight weeks, over the Christmas holidays, seven days a week. It was excruciating, but it changed the whole direction for Jeannette and me. (Mercer 11)

While Zingg acknowledges that they encounter many raised eyebrows because dancers are producing opera, she believes their backgrounds are especially appropriate for the work they do. Theatre anthropologist, Eugenio Barba, links ballet training with other forms of pre-expressive training such as that in Oriental theatre. This training requires a process of acculturation imposed from the outside to enable performers to move in ways unlike the movements of everyday life (*Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* 189-90). The directors of Opera Atelier, trained in ballet, seem ideally suited to lead singers in acquiring practices of eighteenth-century acting. Rule books of that period describe acting as a technical, outside-in approach.

AIMS OF THE SYSTEM

While Zingg concentrates on the dancer's role and choreography for the company, Pynkoski turns his attention to the actor and the delivery of the text. The eighteenth-century actor is operating under an aesthetic that differs from nineteenth-century realism. A performer of the latter period seeks to engage the audience's empathy by seeming to "become" the character in a representational style. Pynkoski explains why this is not appropriate for baroque opera:

> You cannot approach it [baroque opera] with nineteenth-century realism, because it is not meant to be realistic. The characters are two-dimensional -- the good people are utterly good, the bad people are totally bad, the hero is always heroic and you do not act the passion or the phrase -- you act the individual word....If you are making the right gesture and the right inflection at the right moment, your audience will respond, while you stay calm and controlled and able to concentrate on your singing. (Qtd. in Mercer 11)

He trains his actors in the presentational style of theatre stipulated by eighteenth-century French theatre.

Opera Atelier has established a definite point of view and an identifiable look. It makes no apologies for the fact that, informed by historical performance practices, it is bringing to life aristocratic entertainment of a former era. Because the company works with professional singers and actors who bring with them training and experience, the training during the long rehearsal period emphasizes learning the performing style of the company and relaxing into the performance of the particular role. Although the training is physical, Pynkoski comments on psychological demands the physical style makes on the performers:

> The style is riddled with artifice, so you need confidence to perform it.
>
> You must be well-grounded and centred so you have to feel good about yourself. The style demands a sense of ease and relaxation. (Qtd. in Citron, 23 May 1992)

Eighteenth-century French classicism with its emphasis on rhetorical gesture and technique forms the base of the company's practice. Several sources indicate singers followed the same approach in declamation and rhetorical gesture as actors of the period. Zingg noticed in her research in Paris "bills of actors from the Comédie Française for coaching singers" (Qtd. in Littler, 27 May 1988). In his article "La Rhétorique de l'Opéra", Dene Barnett notes that actors from the Comédie-Française worked with young singers :

> Il faut remarquer que trois fois par semaine Molé, acteur célèbre qui se trouvait alors à l'apogée de sa carrière à la Comédie-Française, donnait les leçons de jeu de théâtre aux jeunes chanteurs du Conservatoire. (345)
>
> (It is necessary to note that three times a week Molé, a celebrated actor then at the height of his career at the Comédie Française, gave lessons in acting to the

young singers of the Conservatory.)

Barnett draws attention to essays and training manuals intended for both actors and opera singers in his five articles on "The Performance Practice of Acting: The Eighteenth Century."[3] Gilbert Austin in his *Chironomia* devotes several pages to acting in opera and states "the performer must equal the tragic actor in his art, as well as sustain the part of an admirable and accomplished singer" (244). Tosi, the noted Italian singing teacher, refers to the singer's use of rhetorical gesture in theatrical recitative. He wrote in his *Observations on the Florid Song* in 1723 that voice teachers must instruct their pupils in gesture and decorum:

> The second [type of recitative] is Theatrical, which being always accompanied with Action by the Singer, the Master is obliged to teach the Scholar a certain natural Imitation, which cannot be beautiful, if not expressed with the Decorum with which Princes speak, or those who know how to speak to Princes. (67)

The term "action" in this context refers to gesture.

Opera Atelier follows French classicism's depiction of the ideal and the beautiful on stage. Pynkoski explains his approach to *Dido and Æneas*:

> ...everybody has to be beautiful onstage, even the villains. I remember when I was coming back from working with Professor Dene Barnett in Australia to stage (Purcell's) *Dido and Æneas*, he finished our conversation by saying to me, "Remember, Dido must always be beautiful, particulary before she dies."
>
> You see, if we allowed her to show her pain realistically, she would become ugly and unattractive. (Qtd. in Littler, 27 May 1988)

This recalls Diderot's instruction from *Le Paradoxe sur le comédien* of 1773 to idealize the truth for the stage:

> An unhappy, a really unhappy woman, may weep and fail to touch you; worse than that, some trivial disfigurement in her may incline you to laughter; the accent which is apt to her is to your ears dissonant and vexatious; a movement which is habitual to her makes her grief show ignobly and sulkily to you; almost all the violent passions lend themselves to grimaces which a tasteless artist will copy but too faithfully, and which a great actor will avoid. In the very whirlwind of passion we would have a man preserve his manly dignity. (Qtd. in Cole 166-167)

Opera Atelier actors must know that they are in the theatre. The opera is art; it is not a slice of life. The company makes no attempt to look naturalistic; rather, it aims for refinement, elegance and grace.

In speaking of the company's production of Rameau's *Pygmalion*, Pynkoski states, "It sort of encapsulates everything that rococo entertainment is about....It was meant to ravish the senses of the audience" (Qtd. in Wagner). Pynkoski's task is to help the actor contribute to the visual elegance of the piece in two major ways: through training the body to the elegance of the "S" curve of *contrapposto* posture and giving a visual dimension to the text through carefully executed gestures.

The novelty of the approach appeals to the company's actors and its loyal audience. For dramatic actor R.H. Thomsom, the group lets him explore unusual areas: "You're working with more *unusuality*. That's my interest in the group" (Qtd. in Citron, 23 April 1992). Zingg offers an explanation for the audience response:

> I think people in the late twentieth-century are ready for form and structure. They're tired of the chaos and negativity in modern art....[It is] also the whole idea of beauty having a cathartic effect on the audience, of beauty lifting people to want to be better, think better thoughts. I know that's a qualitative thing, but lifting people into a realm where goodness and beauty are almost equal beauty can lead you to goodness. ("Opera Atelier")

FUNCTION OF THE SINGER AS ACTOR

A consideration of certain features of the libretto and score of baroque opera will help the reader understand problems a singing actor faces in creating a character for that genre. It is essential to remember that the librettist and composer conceived the characters as ideal not real. Pynkoski speaks of the archetypal nature of the characters. For him Cleopatra, Phaedra and Dido represent queens in distress. Pynkoski explains the way the characters operate:

> Heroes are born heroic and spend their lives looking for someone to rescue. When the witches in Purcell's *Dido and Æneas* sing "Destruction's our delight," they are not trying to be bad. They are evil by nature just as thunder is a natural phenomenon and God put the king on earth to rule. It's the chain of nature. (Interview, 29 Dec. 1993)

Pynkoski's concept of ideal characters in baroque opera is in agreement with music historians. In his *Short History of Opera*, Grout describes Handel's heroes as "universal, ideal types of humanity, moving and thinking on a vast scale, the analogue in opera of the great tragic personages of Corneille" (201). Audience response is not only one of empathy that a realistic character might evoke but one of admiration:

> We are moved by the spectacle of suffering, but our compassion is mingled with admiration at suffering so nobly endured, with pride that we ourselves belong to a species capable of such heroism. (Grout 201)

Barnett mentions that acting in the period was largely restricted to recitative (Part I, 158). It is easier to see how the declamatory style of acting in eighteenth-century France suits early French and Florentine opera than to understand how that acting technique supports florid and sustained song of Roman and Venetian schools. As opera moved from recitative into set pieces it is not only the text that indicates the emotion to be expressed. The melodic line, rhythmic motifs, tempo and instrumental colouring contribute as well. The singer, in addition to emphasizing emotionally charged words, adds expressive devices too such as the *messa di voce* to swell and diminish the intensity of a pitch.

The librettist depicts the character as a composite of various emotional states which the composer interprets musically rather than relying on the narrative to express character. Celletti, in the second chapter of *A History of Bel Canto*, enumerates the many states of mind and heart these arias reflect. There are seduction arias, vengeance arias for the more impetuous, sleep arias, toilette arias, and doubt arias, complex in their "imitation of alternating states of mind" (49). The lament on unrequited love requires beautiful *sostenuto* of sustained singing. Martial trumpet arias call for more vocal agility. Tempest arias, in which the character can "compare the tumult of his passions to the fury of the waves" (116), offer a show piece for the singer. Grout draws on Leichtentritt's writings on

Handel[4] to explain how these set pieces relate to character and plot:

> These operas, as Leichtentritt has pointed out, are based on the presentation of moods not mixed and modified as in "real" life, but each pure, so that a character at any given moment of expression is for the time being simply the incarnation of a certain state of mind and feeling; thus the complete picture of the character is to be obtained by the synthesis of all these expressive moments rather than, as in modern drama, by the analysis of a complex of moods expressed in a single aria or scene. For such an aesthetic, the questions of consistency and plausibility in the plot are secondary: it is of little importance what a situation is or how it comes about, provided that it gives occasion for expression of a mood. (192)

The French dramatic literature of the period called for the playing of individual moods or passions too. The virtuosity of dramatic actors lay in their signalling the varying subtleties of these intensified passions through external signs. As the actors paused to make dramatic points, the audience applauded their artistry and mastery of technique. The audience of this period did not commend an uncontrolled drive of emotion such as an outburst of anger a person might show in life. Drama for them is not life. It is art. The artist must examine life and present its subtle variations artistically. For opera singers, the baroque aria also calls for a display of virtuosity in presenting the complexity of states of feeling depicted by the music. A letter written by Humboldt at the end of the eighteenth century shows that the technique of the Comédie-Française is appropriate for Italian opera of the period:

> The French tragic actor....plays the passion, if I may so speak, rather than the character, holds the onlooker more to the momentary state of his mind, lets him see

> less into the depths of his soul and the direction of his temperament. Because of this there is less change and less individuality in different roles. One could sketch in general an image of a tragic hero, and find the same image, fairly completely, in individual roles. (Qtd. in Barnett, Part V, 32)[5]

Perhaps the lack of individuality in the characters contributed to the singers' inclination to interpolate arias from one opera into another. The caprice of singers does not sound so absurd if the aria substituted depicts a passion similar to the one replaced.

Another problem for the twentieth-century singing actor who is concerned with representing reality is the baroque's infatuation with the castrato voice and sexual ambiguity in casting roles. The male alto or soprano usually enacted the major role in the opera. Celletti reports, however, that although castrati played lovers or suitors, "Quite frequently these roles are played also by women (sopranos or contraltos indiscriminately), dressed in men's clothes" (8). The tenor, who in the nineteenth century took over the role of romantic lover, often played female comic roles *en travesti* in pre-romantic opera.

Opera Atelier manages without castrati. Although some productions employ a baritone, many use a counter-tenor in the role written for a castrato or cast a mezzo-soprano or soprano in the male role. Pynkoski makes no attempt to have the women present themselves as men. He says it was considered "piquant to see women's legs" in former times (Interview, 28 Dec. 1993). Pantaloons under a short skirt signal a female in a male role and allow the mezzo or soprano to deport herself in a feminine manner.

The *da capo* aria, which returns to the text and music of the A section after the singer completes the A and B sections, can create a static situation on stage. This is no problem for Opera Atelier. Pynkoski accepts it as a convention and treats it as such:

> There is no dramatic reason for the return of the A section to happen. Trying to find one results in a strained situation. The singer, no longer in character, moves to the front of the stage and shows off vocally. The repetition of the words gives the excuse to ornament. (Interview, 28 Dec. 1993)

Once the singer-actors come to terms with the idiosyncrasies of the art form, they can work to present the character to the audience. For Pynkoski the singer-actor in baroque opera is a storyteller who brings the story before the eyes as well as the ears of the audience. It is the performer's task to make the audience understand what the character is supposed to feel. Rather than becoming emotionally involved, the performer maintains a detachment from the character, and works on the audience as a manipulator: "He watches him like a hawk and plays him like a fish to ensure the audience is a participant in the drama and not a voyeur." An audience watching an actor "living" the emotional life of the character is reduced to the status of Peeping Tom, according to Pynkoski. The audience derives its pleasure from the actor's skill in artifice: "People aren't living when on stage; they're acting. People go to the theatre to see art not life" (Telephone interview, 26 Aug. 1993). This statement speaks to those audience members who derive a sense of empowerment from an aesthetic experience, for those who leave the theatre inspired to realize their own potential or moved by pity to feel more compassion toward others. Many twentieth-century audiences and theatre artists favour art that has a stonger connection with contemporary life.

Despite the repetitious nature of some of baroque opera's text, Pynkoski considers the text of paramount importance. To tell the story of the opera the performer must learn how the text and the music convey that story. Since the musical director makes the first cut in the audition process for Opera Atelier, there is a strong likelihood that its singers have been trained in the music of the baroque period. They will recognize musical means of emphasis employed by the composer such as phrases repeated at a higher pitch or a specific word singled out for melismatic treatment. Opera Atelier then stresses upon the singer that music serves the word. This principle, exemplified in a work such as Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, is one the Florentine Camerata established as it modelled opera on Greek drama. The early French opera of Lully also follows a theatrical model: "His [Lully's] model for the recitative is said to have been the declamation employed in tragedies at the Comédie Française" (Grout 144). Music director, David Fallis comments on the adjustment this takes for a person coming from a music first approach:

> As a musician you tend to think of opera only as music, and it's tempting to think that these pieces need a ritard to round it out musically; whereas, dramatically this doesn't work out at all. To see something on stage, a dramatic tempo has to be established as well as a musical tempo, as well as a dance tempo. Sometimes all three are incorporated. That means that you have to compromise certain times. ("Opera Atelier")

Pynkoski explains the order in which the performer works the recitative:

> All recitative, for example, goes through my hands first to be set in terms of acting and gesture and staging. Now when I have what I require from my singers as actors, then I hand them over to David. ("Opera Atelier")

Singer Diane Loeb, in preparing for a role with Opera Atelier, describes her approach to baroque opera as it differs form romantic opera:

> In romantic opera, it is the sustained vocal line, but here the emphasis is on the word -- which is why we are using an English translation. First, we read the text and declaim it, then we try to sing it with the same feeling. (Qtd. in Citron, 3 Oct. 1986)

Learning to declaim the text is only one step in the singer's process, says Pynkoski:

> We force our singers to come to terms with text. And I don't mean text only in terms of speaking. I mean text in terms of their body as well. An actor in our productions is meant to be read. You read what they are saying with their mouth. You also read what their body is saying. ("Opera Atelier")

Giving a visual dimension to the text is certainly in keeping with the baroque acting tradition. Barnett cites an example of Nicolini's work from 1710 quoted in Colley Cibber's *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber*:

> Nicolini sets off the Character he bears in an opera, by his action, as much as he does the Words by it, by his Voice; every Limb and Finger, contributes to the Part he acts, insomuch that a deaf man might go along with him in the Sense of it. There is scarce a beautiful Posture, in an old Statue, which he does not plant himself in, as the different Circumstances of the Story give occasion for it. He performs the most ordinary Action, in a manner suitable to the Greatness

> of his Character, and shows the Prince, even in the giving of a Letter, or dispatching of a message, etc. (Part V, 4)[6]

Pynkoski takes his singing actors to the next step by teaching them to act the individual words, reinforcing them with gesture:

> That means going through the text with the singer, underlining all the words that they, as actors, want to emphasize, for only on those words will they make specific gestures. If you're making the right gesture and the right inflection at the right moment, your audience will respond, while you stay calm and controlled and able to concentrate on your singing. (Qtd. in Mercer 11)

The process of acquiring the gestures is imitative, but the singer-actor contributes to the decision of where the gestures should be placed.

Instruction in gesture for his singers is crucial from Pynkoski's point of view. For one thing, he believes that gesture has all but disappeared from acting since the advent of the movie. In former centuries it is not only actors who would have studied gesture. Every student would have been schooled in the art of rhetoric from an early age. Pynkoski suggested reading Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia* to see gestures that students would imitate and memorize along with the text of poetry (Telephone interview, 26 Aug. 1993).[7] Another reason for training singers to illustrate the word stems from their tendency to reflect the music and "conduct themselves" (Interview, 28 Dec. 1993). His observation here concurs with that of Balk. Balk had his singers practice with arbitrary gestures, in part, to convince themselves that they could control their arms rather than semaphoring erratically in response to the music. The alternative approach singing teachers have taken, according to Pynkoski, is to train the singers to hang their arms by their sides.

Because singers are learning a new style of performance, much is dictated by the director. "There is no room for gigantic egos," Pynkoski states; "an actor with the company has to be able to take direction" (Interview, 28 Dec. 1993). Pynkoski discovered when he directed actors in works by Racine and Rousseau that singers are more accustomed to a director leading the way than are actors:

> Singers and dancers are more malleable: they're used to being told what to do; they more easily will accept an order that's imposed.
>
> Actors, on the other hand, want to discover things, to explore.
>
> I find that when I work with singers and dancers, being totally prepared is an asset; with an actor, it's a liability. (Qtd. in Citron, 23 Apr. 1992)

Singers, he contends, are really interested in singing and want to be told what to do so that they will look good on stage:

> Singers have such rudimentary knowledge of blocking that usually they are glad to be told what to do. They really want to get on with singing. (Telephone interview, 26 Aug. 1993).

Actors come from a different kind of training. R. H. Thomson describes his experience performing Racine with Opera Atelier:

> I also innately distrust order because my training flies in the face of it....I want to be anarchic and spontaneous and I can't be because the character tells you everything about himself in a very declamatory style.
>
> There's no subtext. (Qtd. in Citron, 23 Apr. 1992)

Pynkoski states he has the most success with individuals with no acting training or with actors of R. H. Thomson's stature who are confident enough in their technique to experiment with something very different (Telephone interview, 26 Aug. 1993).

While Pynkoski admits (Interview 28 Dec. 1993) that with the beginner "much more is laid on," singers who have been with the company six or seven years contribute more to experimenting in rehearsal. He works with gestures that spring from the singer's impulse and allows for individual differences in performance. Productions that are remounted do not necessarily transpose gestures from the first production onto to a new performer enacting the role in the second. From his own research, Pynkoski draws examples of two different Romeos enacted by Garrick and his rival Barry to show that acting styles were by no means homogenous in the eighteenth century. There is room for the actor's interpretation.

The musical aspects of the role also allow for interpretation especially where ornamentation is concerned. Mel Braun, a singer with Opera Atelier, explains that the composer left room for the singer to add to the composition:

> It is up to each singer to decide how to embellish the line. Composers deliberately left long notes at the end of a cadence because they expected the singer to play with runs and tremors to underline the text. (Qtd. in Citron, 3 Oct. 1986)

Within a framework set by the musical director the singers work out ornaments. Should the audience request an encore, the singer will select the most beautiful section of the piece and re-ornament it. The encore is always carefully planned in advance with the musical director, but the singer only offers it if the response warrants it. Rather than ignoring the applause and pretending the audience is not there, the Opera Atelier performer acknowledges the audience and thus allows it to participate directly in the performance.

In following eighteenth-century ensemble practices the company ensures that the audience sees clearly the gestures and facial expressions of the performer. Barnett's article on ensemble acting gives instructions on acting from Franciscus Lang's *Dissertatio de Actione Scenica* of 1727:

> ...the countenance of the Actor, is to be turned towards the spectators during dialogue, at least for the most part, and the actions of hands and body towards the one with whom he is conversing, to whom his countenance should also be directed when the speech is over. (Part I, 161)

Barnett describes the manner in which one actor gives place to another so that the character who is speaking always faces the audience:

> Dès qu'il avait fini de parler, il s'avançait d'un pas au premier plan, et se détournait des spectateurs pour écouter son interlocuteur. Celui'ci reculait au second plan, et se tournait vers les spectateurs pour pronouncer ses paroles. Ces mouvements faisaient bien comprendre aux spectateurs que les paroles s'adressaient à eux. (La Rhétorique de l'Opéra, 347)
>
> (As soon as he had finished speaking, he advanced one step to the front of stage, and turned away from the spectators to listen to his interlocutor. This latter moved back to the middle ground, and turned toward the spectators to deliver his speech. These movements made the spectators understand that the words were addressed to them.)

Opera Atelier follows this practice in many of its recitatives.

So that Opera Atelier's audience can better follow the text, the company performs most of its works in English translation. The house lights are kept on during the performance at a level which enables the audience to read the libretto printed in each program. The presence of light in the house, together with low levels on stage to represent candle light, creates a different dynamic from that in most contemporary theatres where audiences sit in darkness. Opera Atelier's practice unites the audience with the performers instead of separating them.

NATURE OF THE SINGER AS ACTOR

Since Opera Atelier stresses the externals of performance, there is virtually no mention of the actor's inner process. Attention to physical details is in keeping with Barnett's research in the twentieth century and Diderot's theory in the eighteenth. Barnett explains the purpose and content of his series of articles on eighteenth-century acting:

> A general criterion which has been adopted in the selection of eighteenth century instructions is that they would be directly useful to an actor or director seeking to re-create an eighteenth century acting technique. In accordance with this only those instruction which are specific about physical details are cited... (Part I, 158)

Intuition and emotion were considered gifts which the actor either possessed or did not. For Diderot emotion and intuition were not something to be developed. Instead, they were to be controlled to prevent erratic performances. He advocated a rational control through disciplined training and admired the technique of actors such as Garrick and Clarion, who were able to produce the externals of emotion when they chose without the necessity of "living" the part.

Roach in *The Player's Passion* describes how Diderot would have the rehearsal process bring the actor to the appearance of spontaneous emotion on the stage:

> In Diderot's scheme the actor rehearses his actions until his emotions appear to be spontaneous in our conventional, organic sense of that word -- proceeding from natural feeling, produced without being planted or without labor -- but in fact they are really spontaneous in Robert Whytt or David Hartley's mechanical sense of acquired automatisms. The audience finally sees an illusion of reflexive vitality, responding to outer stimuli as if for the first time; but the actor's real experience is of a sequence of reflexive mechanisms, responding to an inner plan that has been carefully worked out in advance. Allowing the actor affective inspirations in the form of memories and imaginative discoveries during rehearsals, Diderot maintains that by the time the rehearsal process ends, it is meaningless to call the automatized results sensible emotions or spontaneously vital expressions. (152)

Through repetitive drill, Opera Atelier performers acquire a precision that makes actions appear spontaneous.

Pynkoski believes that in real life emotion repels more than it attracts: "We distance ourselves from big emotional responses, and for the most part, emotion distances us" (Interview, 28 Dec. 1993). He wants his actors cool and level headed while working for a physical presence that allows the body to convey what is felt. Whether the actor feels what is conveyed is of no importance. This is, in essence, what Eugenio Barba writes about as he describes work of pre-expressive theatre (188). According to Barba, "It is the *doing* and *how the doing is done* which determines what one expresses" for pre-expressive theatre (187). The actor's intent does not necessarily bring the desired result; the audience reacts to what the actor does. Pynkoski does not work with the character's desire or objective; he works on how the actor looks to the audience.

Pynkoski finds that interesting intuitive things happen in rehearsal as a result of the disciplined physical work. As a result of fatigue and constant repetition, the singer relaxes physically and experiences breakthroughs. Intuition springs forward when the intellect is at low ebb. The right side of the brain or something other than the conscious mind allows the gesture to work (Telephone interview, 26 Aug. 1993). This sounds similar to the progress Balk's students make when they allow their bodies and voices to lead in the discovery process. Whereas Balk advocates exercises to induce intuition, Pynkoski accepts it when it appears in a rehearsal situation.

Part of the physical communication is through the actor's face. The company uses period make-up to ensure that the face can be seen in the dim stage light. Highly rouged cheeks and well defined mouth and eye brows show strongly on a whitened face. There is no mention of exercises for facial flexibility or the signalling of specific passions. The emphasis in physical skill is on posture and gesture.

Posture follows the *contrapposto* pose or "S" curve that sets up a balanced but asymmetrical body. Eugenio Barba accounts for the popularity of the position in his writings on pre-expressive theatre:

> This dynamic undulation of the body around an axis....[was] taken up by Florentine sculptors in the fourteenth century as a reaction against the immobility of Byzantine and medieval figures. (180)

In the television documentary on Opera Atelier, Pynkoski describes and illustrates the pose singers and actors adopted in the eighteenth century:

> One of the basic rules for a singer in opera is that the weight is always carried on one foot. It's never carried on two as you see so often today. The weight is carried on one foot or leg and the other leg is simply allowed to drop and relax. The weight relaxes into the hip and there is a natural inclination of the body away from the leg that you're standing on. That inclination of the body can be very, very slight or it can be very extreme. It can be made even more extreme if that knee is bent, maybe even more extreme if you're playing a sort of Commedia character to become a sort of parody. But that curve of the body is something that's essential. Sometimes we go for the classic *contrapposto* stance in which if this hip is high therefore that shoulder is going to be high. The head can either continue the line of the body or it can oppose it creating that sort of an "S" that goes through the body. ("Opera Atelier")

For Pynkoski the position gives the performer an active body even when still (Interview 28 Dec. 1993). The effect is one of contrast and variety seen in ancient sculpture. Barnett cites an instance from Diderot's *Déclamation Théâtrale* in which Diderot compliments an opera singer on his study of art:

> M. Chassé owes the loftiness [fierté] of his attitudes, the nobility of his gestures and the fine skill of his costumes to the masterpieces of Sculpture and Painting which he has purposely [sçavamment] observed.

(Qtd. in Barnett V, 1)

Although Pynkoski suggests that placing weight on one foot is natural for us, "That's what we do when we wait for the bus," it is not how a singer is accustomed to stand while performing. Singers usually plant their feet and root their weight into the floor. Pynkoski reserves such a stance for cases of extreme belligerence (Interview 28 Dec. 1993). He is in agreement with Gilbert Austin who writes:

> Rude strength may suit him who wishes to terrify or to insult; but this is rarely the purpose of a public speaker...Rude strength stands indeed with stability, but without grace. (295)

Austin equates a graceful stance with that of the statue of Apollo in a quotation that appears in Opera Atelier's program for *Dido and Æneas*:

> The body must then be supported, if grace be consulted, on either limb, like the Apollo, the Antinous, or other beautiful and well executed statues. The foot, which at any instant sustains the principal weight, must be placed, that a perpendicular line let fall from the hole of the neck shall pass through the heel of that foot. (Austin 296)

Ideally the singing actor should be able to assume various postures and "round the stage" (move into positions in other than straight lines) with nonchalance and aristocratic ease. Pynkoski draws attention to the fact that aristocrats are comfortable with the position God gave them. They move through life with stupendous ease. This is not arrogance but acceptance. Only people who have to work assert themselves. Pynkoski contends that the ease the actor projects makes Opera Atelier's acting style far less affected than postures one often sees on the opera stage today (Telephone interview, 26 Aug. 1993).

The elegant gestures of the company are made to stand out for the audience because the performers wear white gloves. Pynkoski explains that this allows the white hands and the white face to be read as a unit to give the audience a complete message:

> A baroque actor's tools were elbow to fingers and chin to forehead -- that's why the hands are carried close to the face, so that you get a complete picture. (Qtd. in Mercer 12)

This explanation recalls DeSimone's instructions to his young Mignon that she keep her gestures closer to her face so that the audience would see the face too and not just follow the moving hands.

Opera Atelier's program for the 1989 *Dido* informs the audience about four basic categories of gesture which the company draws from Quintillian's essays on oratory: the emphatic to enforce meaning, the imitative, the indicative that point out, and the affective in which the actor expresses a specific passion such as anger or joy. Pynkoski states his actors rarely use affective gestures such as wringing their hands to show anguish but that often they use emphatic gestures "to tease focus or herald a word" especially in a recitative. During certain arias the actors will gesture less often and "live with a pose until there is reason to move again" (Interview, 28 Dec. 1993). Pynkoski recommends Austin's *Chironomia* and Barnett's *Art of Rhetorical Gesture* as source books for anyone wanting to know more about rhetorical practices on the baroque stage.

So that the execution of the gesture is graceful, the actor must remember that "the elbow is the soul of the arm." The curve of the arm gives the beautiful line. For the stage the gesture is larger than in real life at twelve to fourteen inches from the body. But he cautions against the straight arm movement from the shoulder. Such a move is "equivalent to a scream" (Interview 28 Dec. 1993). The actor must also learn to group the fingers as Pynkoski describes in the television documentary on the company:

> The hands have got to be extremely articulate. One of the basic groupings of this period is the middle finger is grouped; the thumb is pushed through so that it curves. There was the feeling that this was one of the most articulate hands you could use...to make yourself understood. The only times that those rules of beauty and deportment are broken is when there is extremely strong emotion like shock or fear when the hands would suddenly break off those rules, spread widely and be carried very close to the face. ("Opera Atelier")

Pynkoski cautions against too many gestures. The actor has to experiment with how many gestures to use and how extreme they should be to prevent the segment from becoming "a thing with arms" (Interview, 28 Dec. 1993). Stillness can be effective when the pose expresses the active body. Compare this with Major for whom stillness is effective when the singer has an active mind.

Opera Atelier's singer-actors do not engage in exercises to awaken emotion or intuition. Spontaneity comes of its own accord when repetitive drill in rehearsal conditions the performers to act as if for the first time. Rather than following an inner approach to character creation, the company's singer-actors aspire to create a physical presence which captures the elegance of the eighteenth-century aristocratic ideal. Their duty is to the audience, and through physical gesture they guide the audience through the story. In a system which prizes decorum over naturalness, the singer-actors strive for verisimilitude, or truth seemingness. They do, however, break the fourth wall to respond to the audience's demand for an encore. Although this practice interrupts the reality of the stage action, it does not break conventions of the period.

OPERA ATELIER IN REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE

Opera Atelier is patient with its singers and understands that acquiring the physical technique of eighteenth-century style is a slow process. Although its singers do not rehearse every day, they are under contract for a four-month period. Pynkoski encourages slow growth allowing singers to feel comfortable with what he confides are the "specific boring details" until actions slip into a "kinetic stream of consciousness" (Interview, 28 Dec. 1993). He spoke of rehearsing a one-and-a-half-minute duet for the 1993 production of Charpentier's *Actéon* in four rehearsals of two to three hours each. The result was a fascinating display with one soloist, Meredith Hall, carving a pattern of gesture with the delicacy one might expect from a ballerina. Eight to ten hours go into the staging of each aria. The television documentary traces Odette Beaupré's process as she prepares for the role of the Sorceress in Purcell's *Dido and Æneas*. Over a six-week period, Pynkoski worked with her two or three times a week. Some footage shows him helping her co-ordinate the glance of the eye and the hand gesture with the text of a rapid passage. A clip from the production illustrates that the consistent work let her perform the moves as if they were second nature.

She and Laura Pudwell have performed many roles with the company and appreciate the working relationship between the singers and the artistic directors. Beaupré talks of her growing confidence under Pynkoski's direction in the documentary:

> I was scared, I felt like an elephant, really. You know he is so graceful. I was trying to make those moves and I didn't like my image in the mirror, not at all.... He never laughed at me, never. I laughed at myself.... What he gave me is self-confidence. I can do quite everything I want. I will carry that all my life. ("Opera Atelier")

Pudwell describes her metamorphosis into an Atelier performer:

> When I first saw Jeannette [Zingg] in rehearsal, she was so beautiful that I was intimidated. How could I ever look like her?
>
> Now I know I look beautiful when I'm in the costume and the posture because I feel it.
>
> My hand falls naturally as does my weight and I'm comfortable with my body and in my body, even when I'm playing a man.
>
> When I walk out onstage, I know people will love me. I refuse to be embarrassed by or apologize for how I look in 18th-century dress because it's become part of my tissue. (Qtd. in Citron, 23 Apr. 1992)

A loyal Toronto audience supports the company which goes out of its way to inform them of its performance practices. The programs each give scholarly articles on various aspects of the production from information on dance notation to the translator's explanation of his process in transforming the libretto into singable English. The complete libretto is published in print large enough to follow during the performance. Although the singers focus on diction, embellishments can obscure the text in arias that soar above the treble clef. To help the audience enter a different work, the company begins each opera with a rhymed prologue written especially for it.

One of the delights of the company's productions is the interplay of the performers and the audience. The convention of the fourth wall does not hold here. The story is being told for the audience's benefit. Thus in Charpentier's *Actéon* when Juno explains the trick she played on Actéon, a trick that led to his transformation into a stag that was devoured by his hounds, she delivers the text to the audience not to the chorus of characters on stage. Behind her the chorus reacts to the narrative to set up the response in the audience by asking, "Don't you feel as we feel?" When Actéon's artifacts are brought on stage, the chorus responds with affective gestures of grief wringing their hands and covering their faces. As they express their grief vocally in antiphonal phrases, the audience can see as well as hear the exchange of sorrow pass between the two groups of characters. They did not, however, succeed in making this viewer feel their emotion.

Earlier in the opera the nymphs warn audience members to avert their eyes while Diana and they bathe. Such modesty seems somewhat hypocritical beside a dance in which they tease the spectators. The nymphs tell the audience that sighs are of no interest to them; the sighs only trouble the bath of Diana. Since the audience will not go away, Diana instructs the nymphs to turn their backs to preserve their modesty. The removal of a glove and the baring of a shoulder round out the titillation of the bath scene. It is charming.

The performance of several of the *da capo* arias in Handel's *Il Pastor Fido* show that these sometimes become an event between the singer and the audience. Eurilla retires to a bench upstage right to give centre stage to Mirtillo. Mirtillo vents his emotion in a fiery A section and stays in the stage picture in the B section by picking up the handkerchief dropped by the exiting Amarilli, his beloved. During the recapitulation, Linda Maguire as Mirtillo comes down centre and delivers the re-ornamented A section straight out to the audience. She strikes a picturesque pose that she adjusts by transferring weight or re-balancing her arms to accompany a new musical phrase. After acknowledging the applause, the singer backs up to centre stage keeping her face to the audience. She acknowledges Eurilla and exits stage left. When the audience applause signals an encore, the singer re-enters, moves to the down centre position and offers yet another variation of the A section. This time the singer backs to centre and invites Eurilla to take the stage as Mirtillo exits again.

Not all arias are staged as soliloquies. Two from *Il Pastor Fido* illustrate the ensemble between the singer and the listener and characterize the relationships between the two pairs of lovers. Kathleen Brett as Amarilli cautions Mirtillo to compose himself in her first aria. She must marry Silvio to appease the goddess Diana. She is willing to sacrifice love to duty and reject Mirtillo's offers. The audience sees her gently ward him off in a mild gesture of rejection with out-turned palms toward Mirtillo and her face turned in the opposite direction. But when she thinks he is not looking the wrists allow the hands to drop and the head sneaks a look in his direction. Mirtillo, in turn, tries to steal a glance at her to see whether she really wants to reject him. The clever pantomime during the orchestral interludes permits him and the audience a glance at her true feelings. The dropped handkerchief softened her exit line, "No pity for your pain; I must be cruel."

Beaupré's Dorinda knows what she wants and breaks the rules of decorum in her pursuit of Silvio. *Globe and Mail* critic Robert Everett-Green describes this comic pair as "just stopping short of Punch and Judy" (13 Oct. 1990). Dorinda upbraids Silvio (Pudwell) for shunning and neglecting her. Silvio, at the end of his wits, covers his face with his hands. No subtle out-turned palms will rebuff her. Silvio resorts to stronger straight-armed gestures. When Dorinda manages to place Silvio's hand on her bosom so that he can feel her broken heart, Pudwell times a double take that delights the audience. Then the character breaks into a run to flee Dorinda who charges after him with arms extended at full length, albeit decorously positioned one above the other. A few vocal squawks jarred the ear. *Toronto Star* critic William Littler commented on the performance:

> Pudwell's performance tended to break out of the silken bonds of 18th-century vocal style for some verismo exclamations of resistance to becoming passion's object. (12 Oct. 1990)

The couple strained the limits of style, but the ensemble work of the horse play included some fine clowning, and the level of skill which the performers exhibited enhanced the effect.

When the situation switches from song to dance in this company the visual change is not as abrupt as in other opera companies where the eye moves from lumbering singer to svelte dancer. While Everett-Green notes that the audience has had to get used to highly decorative costumes in Atelier's production of Handel's *Julius Caesar*, he points out that the suspension of disbelief which this company asks of its audience differs form that required by audiences of many other companies:

> OA has never demanded that its audiences make the imaginative leaps so often required in traditional opera houses, where five-foot princes regularly court 300-pound heroines. (31 Oct. 1987)

Women playing male roles is not a disturbing factor in Atelier's productions. The stylization draws attention to the virtuosity of the performers and allows the audience to read their skills in conveying the character rather than the gender. Pudwell and Maguire managed this well in *Il Pastor Fido*. Not only were the comic scenes of the opera effective, but Maguire and Brett evoked some pathos in Act III as Mirtillo offers to die in Amirilli's place. Their stylized pathos represented emotional truth and avoided melodrama.

If the audience members study their program notes on gesture, they will see that the actors do use the four main categories of gesture, especially in recitative. For this audience member seeing the company's work for the first time, the actors' use of gesture seems easier to get used to than the posing during arias. The effectiveness of the posture, in part, depends on the conviction with which the performer can achieve it. Some singers look exceptionally good as they seem to adopt the pose naturally and commit themselves to it. Others look self-conscious.

A comparison of early and recent critical response suggests that the group is perfecting its technique with each performance. *Globe and Mail* critic John Kraglund was sceptical about the early days of the company:

> One thing continues to puzzle me. If beauty is the prime aim in Baroque opera, why does the highly favoured leaning stance (employed by singers not in action) always seem so ugly?
> (6 Oct. 1986)

Kraglund does credit Diane Loeb in that production of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* with some success: "...she managed to make the somewhat angular gestures of Baroque interpretation seem moderately graceful." Robert Everett-Green notes the company's progress in his 1989 review titled, "Opera Atelier comes of age with spectacular *Orfeo*." In this he praised the "elegantly stylized gesture" and the "coherent musical concept." Comments on the acting were about interpretive choices rather than on the performers' skills at executing them.

Toronto critics, who seem to approach the company from different poles, continue to puzzle over the work the company does. Everett-Green questions choices that take the company away from the strict application of eighteenth-century rules such as failure to position principal characters down right[8] in Racine's *Andromache* or introducing Commedia characters into Mozart's *Figaro*. Christopher Hume's article on *Figaro* bears the title, "Opera Atelier 'can finally relax' with Figaro" (8 October 1992). Yet in it he vacillates between his admiration of the company's recreation of history and his concern that theatre be relevant. He draws on American director Peter Sellar's recent comments to a Toronto arts conference regarding the dangers of living up to a past ideal.[9]

The co-artistic directors can answer both views. Although Pynkoski and Zingg are concerned with historical accuracy, their main concern is to find an approach to the work that brings the piece to life. Treating the operas as naturalistic theatre does not seem to work. British Handel scholar Winton Dean spoke of his dissatisfaction with recent productions of Handel's operas in a 1985 lecture :

> I myself have seen over 100 performances of thirty-six different operas, many of which I consider to be major masterpieces. Yet very few of them have satisfied me or struck me as doing full justice to Handel. Either I am on the wrong track, or there is something wrong with the performances. ("Handel's Opera Today" 47)

He suggests that the problem lies in "ingrained resistance to the *opera seria* convention" (47) and contends that anyone intending to produce such an opera "be familiar with the theatrical as well as the musical background" (51). The paper makes an interesting point about directors making new statements with operatic works. He suggests postponing that approach with Handel until the audience is familiar with the composer's intent and has seen the operas staged in "proper style" (55). The proper style involves paying careful attention to the libretto and the recitative that carries the drama and allowing the characters to be built up by the contrasting arias. Whether Dean would applaud Opera Atelier's productions remains a point of speculation at this time. But the company is attempting to let baroque opera speak to the audience on its own terms.

Pynkoski speaks of relevance as a "red herring" (Interview, 28 Dec. 1993). His concern is with excellence. Excellence is inspiring. And inspiration *is* relevant for many people. In the television documentary, Zingg gives her perspective on the cathartic effect of beauty "lifting people to want to be better, think better thoughts." With regard to acting, Pynkoski wants the visual line to look as elegant as the vocal line sounds. He is prepared to spend months of detailed work with the singers to help them achieve a beautiful, visual interpretation of the text. Working in such detail with many of the same performers over a period of years, Pynkoski is achieving excellent ensemble work that is particulary effective in comedy. In more poignant arias the music carries the emotion. Those singers who are comfortable with the baroque posture are much easier to watch than some opera singers who heave their way through moments of intense emotion, lurching at any piece of furniture that will support the weight of their grief and their frame.

The company is performing to full houses in Toronto. Opera centres outside Canada are taking notice and inviting the company to perform. Singers are prepared to work with them for lower salaries than they usually command. Zingg believes she can account for this last phenomenon because the performers enjoy working with a company that lets them do their very best ("Opera Atelier"). Not many companies have a long rehearsal period during which singing actors can grow into the role and the ensemble. Littler's review of the 1993 *Actéon*, written by Charpentier in 1684, addresses the company on its own terms:

> But as I've suggested, Opera Atelier is not primarily an agent of archaeology; it is interested in taking Baroque opera off the library shelf and making it work for those of us unfortunate enough to lack a 17th-century education. (13 Oct. 1993)

The company is succeeding in this objective and is training many singers to act in a style that compliments baroque music.

CONCLUSION

To recapture some of the marvellous gesture and posture of a former operatic age, Opera Atelier revives acting techniques of the eighteenth century. The outside-in approach the company takes illustrates the efficacy of drill in the singer-actor's acquisition of automatism that leads to true spontaneity. The idea of true beauty of form having its own cathartic values forms the aesthetic for this company that accents verisimilitude rather than *verité*.

NOTES

[1] Segments of this production are recorded on video in *A Composer's Notes: Philip Glass The Making of Akhnaten*, Filmed by Michael Blackwood, (New York: Video Artists International, 1985).

[2] Excerpts from the Sellars' version of this opera are included in the video entitled *Destination Mozart: A Night at the Opera with Peters Sellars,* (W. Long Branch, NJ: Kultur International Films, 1990).

[3] In this chapter I shall refer to the English language articles of Dene Barnett as Part I, II, III, IV or V. The articles appear in *Theatre Research International*, "The Performing Practice of Acting": Part I: "Ensemble Acting", May 1977; Part II: "The Hands", Oct. 1977; Part III: "The Arms", Feb. 1978; Part IV: "The Eyes, the face and the Head", Winter 1979-80; Part V: "Posture and Attitudes", Winter 1979-80.

[4] *Handel*, 592 ff; *Music, History, and Ideas*, dates not given, 150-51.

[5] Letter dated 18 August 1799, from Friedrich Heinrich Alexander von Humboldt, in *Propylaen*, (J. W. von Goethe), Tubingen, 1798-1800, III.1: 66.

[6] Cibber quotes form Steele's 115th *Tatler*, Jan. 1719.

[7] Austin illustrates the use of gesture and posture by applying his symbols to poems and dramatic speeches such as Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard" (524-538) and Brutus' funeral speech from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (539-544).

[8] The reader might read Barnett's article on Ensemble Acting to see Metastasio's view of these conventions. This famous *opera seria* librettist became quite exasperated with such rules when he wrote to Pasquini in 1748 about his opera *Demofoonte*:

> If you want to know to whom is allotted the right or the left, I reply to you that it is allotted not according to the rank of the role, but according to convenience and the requirements of the actions..."
> (Qtd. in Barnett I, 167)

In that same article Barnett cites the librettist's letter to Hasse about this same issue and clinches his argument by pointing out that such rules are conventional and not natural: "...you know that in a gondola in Venice the person of the highest rank sits on the left. (170)

[9] In an interview with Chicago broadcaster, Bruce Duffie, Peter Sellars commented on the necessity of studying the literary forms of opera, but when he spoke of the drama in Handel's operas he made the following observations:

> You have to make a distinction between what a composer imagines when he writes a piece, and what the limitations of the theatrical form of their day are. I would hate to limit Handel to the maddeningly unambitious early eighteenth-century British stage where literally it was a theatre of machines not unlike our Broadway of today. Everything was a retread, real tragedy was not possible, and they had to rewrite King Lear with a happy ending. To hold a composer of the ambition and profundity of Handel hostage to the lack of ambition of his theatrical contemporaries is also not fair. One has to realize that there is a level where the music rises above everything seen on the stage during his time. ("Conversation Piece" 53)

Pynkoski's approach to Handel is much more in keeping with Winton Dean's ideal. Dean holds that Handel's operas are "integrated musical dramas" with a viable form even though that form differs from what we are used to today (Dean 48-50).

CONCLUSION

In his 1951 *Opera for the People*, Herbert Graf upbraided America's opera audience for ignoring the dramatic element of this art form:

> ...opera to its American audience is essentially a means of providing beautiful music, while the drama serves merely as a frame to make this sensual experience possible. Vocal quality and quantity, rather than their function as a means for the expression of the underlying drama, are the focal point of interest, and the meaning of the words, the acting, and the staging take a place of secondary importance. (19)

Opera's exotic mystique was enough for such an audience accustomed to hearing works in a foreign language in huge auditoriums or on record. Undoubtedly many people still approach opera from this perspective. However, since mid-century the popularity of film and television has alerted audiences to naturalistic acting styles. Opera's dredging up of exalted emotional states in grandiose gestures can seem ridiculous in comparison rather than sublime.

Operatic performances on film and television and in the numerous regional companies that have emerged since 1970 necessitate the modification of performances that might have passed in larger venues. The growing use of English translations and surtitles, despite their drawbacks, allows North American audiences to follow what is happening on the stage. The more realistically based performances today are an ensemble effort without stars stepping out to fracture the reality of the stage picture by courting personal gratification. The opera community is getting serious about the quality of acting in opera productions. Regardless of differences in methods used to achieve their goals, the programs examined in this thesis address acting for the singer-actor as intrinsically important for opera.

Research into training the singer to act in North America revealed two main camps: those devoted to process and training the performer in acting classes and workshops and those who favour production experience where singers acquire acting skills and experience while performing roles. The more process oriented, such as Balk and Major, want the singer-actor to feel competent, creative and knowledgeable of the working process prior to taking on a role; whereas, DeSimone and Pynkoski teach the acting process while the singer is engaged in learning a role. For Pynkoski, however, this situation is perhaps not ideal. With Le Centre De Musique Baroque de Versailles his work involves a series of classes to teach the techniques of rhetorical gesture before the company applies them to a specific opera. In Toronto, financial constraints limit his work to the rehearsal period, but he intends, eventually, to hold workshops where he and company members can experiment. Then, three out of four teachers/directors in this study support the singer-actor acquiring a physical and/or inner process prior to performing. DeSimone remains committed to the apprenticeship format he experienced in Europe.

Those who favour process encourage the singer-actor's input and participation in the creative process. The singer, then moves from Goldovsky's interpreter to become a creative artist. For Balk, this means a flexible performer who is creative in discovering performance possibilities in a role and in the capacity to respond to directorial decisions. Major's singer-actor is a member of the creative interaction and blocking during the rehearsal process. Pynkoski scores the opera's physical movements, but the singer-actor determines with the director which words in the text receive attention through gesture. DeSimone, on the other hand, determines the characters' intentions as well as the physical score. His performers make his predetermined score their own during the final phases of the rehearsal period. In the hands of this astute and concerned director, many students gradually learn to build a role through several performance opportunities.

While all singer-actors require the intellectual capacity to translate, learn and memorize a role and to understand the character's position in the circumstances of the opera, the relative importance of the intellect varies from system to system. Balk's singer-actor uses it to monitor new elements incorporated into the learning spiral to check that entanglements accompanying the new acquisitions are eliminated. Balk de-emphasizes the intellect to allow intuition, released in vocal flexes and arbitrary attitudes and gestures, to lead the way in discovering character. For Major, intellect, with the assistance of imagination, devises the singer-actor's mental score of objectives and monitors it in performance. DeSimone's students also use a silent script to hold themselves within the character's thoughts during the performance. The intellect acts in an analytical capacity for Pynkoski's company as they prepare recitatives prior to setting gestures.

Pynkoski's system pays virtually no attention to emotion. His concern is with beautiful form through physical means. Major pays little attention to evoking emotion in the singer-actor. If the performer experiences emotion, it is a result of carrying out the character's thoughts and actions; he does not advocate starting from the singer-actor's emotional experiences. The emotional impact of opera is very important for DeSimone and Balk. Both want the audience to receive an emotional experience, and both are concerned that it not be at the expense of the singer-actor's vocal health. DeSimone works on the externals of presentation that will signal emotion to the audience regardless of whether or not the performer feels it. The young singer-actors are then at liberty to experiment to discover their comfort level in delivering a carefully controlled performance or to release emotions the situation evokes. Balk has the students work through emotions which his exercises release in order to eliminate entanglements impeding vocal freedom.

The cultivation of the imagination is important to Balk, Major and DeSimone. All have students engage in improvisation to simulate the imagination. For DeSimone, the singer-actor's ability to visualize and make connections between the character's experience and the performer's own helps his students make sense of the role. It also links their focus and that of the audience with the character's focus. The performer's focus is also important to Balk and Major. For

Major and DeSimone, the thought focus is on the circumstances of the story. Balk's student might achieve the same effect with a more mechanically directed focus. Whereas Major and DeSimone might work from the imagination to the externalization of what it discovers, Balk often advocates performing the act to see what the body tells the mind.

Balk and Major seek to awaken spontaneity in students so that they can generate ideas for creating character. Balk's singer-actor acquires skills to accept appropriate choices which his arbitrary exercises often release. Spontaneity's role is more obviously built into Major's ensemble process as singer-actors respond to one another in class and rehearsal. DeSimone and Pynkoski provide for the occurrence of spontaneity in performance by making the singer-actors so secure during the rehearsal process that they appear spontaneous and are able to work with intuitive flashes should they happen in performance.

All teachers/directors in this study advocate that the singer-actor get in touch with the body. Neither Balk nor DeSimone require their students to take formal dance classes. DeSimone's students do have a mandatory movement credit. Balk's arbitrary gestures and twenty-five positions ensure that his singer-actors can fulfil a director's blocking requirements. Pynkoski's performers are drilled until they feel very confident in their bodies and can execute the prescribed gestures and poses with elegance and ease. The physical presentation is as important in Opera Atelier as the vocal. Ironically, Major, who values stillness on stage, heads a program that gives its students at least three hours a movement and/or dance each semester. In addition to helping students move naturally on stage, the classes help them fill the sustained phrases and long orchestral interludes with physical presence.

What the singer-actors share with the audience differs for these directors. Major's students involve the audience in the story, but DeSimone's and Balk's students seek to involve the audience in an emotional experience. For Pynkoski, the aesthetic experience of seeing and hearing a beautiful work performed well is the goal. Part of that baroque aesthetic is to invite the audience to participate in the performance. When the characters break the imaginary fourth wall in an Opera Atelier production, they do so within the convention of the baroque aesthetic. Major's singer-actors respect realism's convention of the fourth wall through which the audience is allowed to eavesdrop. DeSimone's students also maintain the illusion of reality and the fourth wall while acknowledging the need to open their bodies to the audience so that it might read them as well as their voices. Both Pynkoski and Major prefer small auditoriums where the audience can read gesture and facial expression. In such houses the quality of performance does not just mean quantity of voice. Major's ideal house size is seven to eight hundred seats. Pynkoski now plays in houses that seat seven hundred to eleven hundred but looks forward to a five-hundred-seat auditorium should Toronto build its opera-ballet theatre.

All four systems contribute to the growth of the singer as actor. Balk offers the authority dependent singer an alternative way to learn roles. Major trains the singer to become a contributing member of a creative ensemble. DeSimone provides opportunities for singers to experience the production process while they are university students. Pynkoski gives his performers a mastery over their bodies that leads to the confidence of knowing that the singers' bodies can be as elegant as their voices.

In 1723 in Bologna, the famous Italian singing teacher, Tosi, addressed the difficulty of acting and singing at the same time:

> I do no know if a perfect Singer can at the same time be a perfect Actor; for the Mind being at once divided in two different Operations, he will probably incline more to one than the other; it being, however much more difficult to sing well than to act well the Merit of the first is beyond the second. What a Felicity would it be, to possess both in a perfect Degree! (Tosi, 152)

Singing ability will always determine a person's potential for an operatic career. For the singer to acquire skill in acting that equals vocal skill, training to the same degree is necessary in both. Because the singer-actor must meet the demands of the orchestral score, it appears that an outside-in approach or a score of physical actions serves the actor in this art form better than an inside-out approach that tries to reproduce emotion. Many of the acting teachers at opera centres canvassed during research for this thesis hold this view which favours actions over emotions. For example, Richard Harrell, administrator and acting teacher at the Julliard Opera Center, wrote the following in a paper, "Techniques for the Singing Actor":

> Many acting teachers believe that it is more reliable to play an action rather than to attempt to replicate emotions. Genuine emotion flows as a response to

> our environment and to our personal engagement with others.

Methods for training a singer in acting exist. The four teachers/directors whose work this thesis explores are committed to giving potential opera singers that training. Whether or not singers acquire acting skills depends on their concern and the concern of teachers in opera training centres with preparing for opera's total requirements.

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